



THE SPIRITUAL
WORDS OF
FR MACARIUS WAHBA

A COLLECTION OF HOMILIES

Coptic Orthodox Diocese of Melbourne

The Spiritual Words of Fr Macarius Wahba

A Collection of Homilies

COMPILED AND EDITED BY

The Coptic Orthodox Diocese of Melbourne,

Australia

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For Fr Macarius Wahba

in memorium

(1961-2020)

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Preface

This book presents for the first time the homilies of Fr Macarius Wahba (1961-2020) transcribed and made reader-friendly for all those who wish to benefit from his spiritual teaching. Sixteen homilies were collated from the record collection of parishioners from St Mary's Coptic Orthodox Church in Melbourne. Of course, there exists a wealth of sermons that were unavailable to the compiler and for this reason are not included here. After the completion of this book, old sermons have recently surfaced, and these will be helpful in the production of Vol. II of his spiritual words.

This initiative was undertaken by youth servants from the Coptic Diocese of Melbourne who were deeply inspired by Fr Macarius' Christ-like mentorship. They hope to preserve his saintly memory in writing for generations to come.

Anyone who reads this book will quickly learn that Fr Macarius relied on the church and desert fathers for his biblical interpretations. Topics that deal with evidence for the eucharist and the resurrection are explored in chapters six and seven whereby he signifies the necessity and relevance of each to any Christian person. Moreover, his own spiritual journey seemed to be embedded into his approach. In chapter one, *Let*

Not Your Heart Be Troubled, we understand that despite his actual heart condition, he focuses instead on the state of the spiritual heart; that which concerns communion with God. A similar approach is taken with chapter four, *Troubled Hearts*.

His instruction is simple and practical, and challenges youth to face spiritual struggles with hope and confidence in Christ. The eighth chapter, *Spirituality in Practice* aims to do just that. It was a sequence of youth topics he delivered based on a book authored by Fr Athanasius Iskander titled "The Practice of Spirituality". In it, he explores topics relevant to the spiritual journey for young adults with specific references to their daily struggles.

This book, by no coincidence, begins with the first sermon Fr Macarius delivered as a priest titled "Let not your heart be troubled" and his final sermon before his passing titled, "Lazarus, come forth". Since the former was his first sermon that he delivered in 1993 at St Mary's Church upon his return from Egypt after his ordination to the priesthood. The final chapter is the last sermon he delivered before his departure.

We pray that this book is useful to the youth of the Diocese of Melbourne.

The Life of Fr Macarius Wahba

As recounted by Very Rev. Fr Tadros Sharobeam¹

Our beloved father, Very Reverend Fr Macarius Wahba (formerly Victor, prior to his ordination) was born on 6th of September 1961 to devout parents, the late deacon Louis Wahba and Mrs Faiza Wahba. He is survived by his wife, Tasoni Christina Wahba, and his brother, Mr Joseph Wahba. Our beloved Victor grew up in a truly loving Christian home, wholly dedicated to the service of the Church. Deacon Louis, who served closely with His Holiness St Pope Kyrillos VI, took his family to visit His Holiness for advice and blessing prior to migrating to Australia from Egypt on 21st of March 1971. As they were accustomed to praying together, deacon Louis asked His Holiness whether he should take his young family to Australia. His Holiness blessed the young Victor on the crown of his head with a cross, saying, “Go, make for us a Church.”

Indeed, the young Victor grew as a youth and deacon in St Mark’s Church under the guidance of the late Very Rev. Fr Victor Rafael and went on to serve at Archangel Michael

¹ Adapted from a print booklet prepared by the youth of St Mary’s Coptic Orthodox Church: “In loving memory of the Very Reverend Father Macarius Wahba” (11 October 2020).

and St Anthony Parish, Oakleigh. As a lay servant, deacon Victor actively participated as a deacon, Sunday School service, and in the youth ministry, taking on greater roles and responsibilities in the service, and serving alongside the Late Very Rev. Fr Mina Ibrahim. Deacon Victor also translated numerous books, articles, and Church bulletins from Arabic to English. He brought the Arabic Christian literature of the 1980's to the second and third generation Australians in their own language; books on Church tradition, sacraments, faith, and other spiritual gems. His translations and weekly bulletins answered many questions that had bewildered the youth and helped address their spiritual needs. Additionally, after the first English translation of the Divine Liturgy according to St Gregory in 1977, deacon Victor participated in translating the second edition. This edition was published by the Diocese of Sydney in 1990. Deacon Victor continued to refine this edition. He was also part of the first group of students in 1986 to graduate and complete Theological study by correspondence at Pope Shenouda III Theological College in Sydney, being only one of two youths to do this at the time.

As the congregation and service grew in Melbourne, His Eminence Metropolitan Asheya, Metropolitan of Tahta and Geneha, who served in Melbourne for some years, nominated deacon Louis Wahba for the priesthood. However, Pope Shenouda III of blessed memory, is recalled having said, "No, we will ordain his son instead." Almost a decade later, with the establishment of the Coptic School in February 1991, there was need for a second Priest for the parish of St Mary's in Kensington, which is served by the Very Rev. Fr Tadros

Sharobeam since September 1979. On 3rd of May 1992, Victor and Tasoni Christina were married, and deacon Victor was soon nominated by the clergy and congregation for ordination to the priesthood to serve at St Mary's Church. Ordained by Pope Shenouda III of blessed memory on 14th of March 1993 in Cairo, Egypt, he was given the name Macarius after St Macarius the Great, whom he loved and whose example he followed. The name Macarius means "blessed", and Fr Macarius truly lived and served in a blessed manner.

Fr Macarius paid special attention to youth service and Sunday School, guiding and leading them by his calm and gentle spirit into the love of Christ in his blessed person. And thus, he pastored generations in the sacrament of confession. Fr Macarius' service was distinguished by his humility and utmost simplicity. He never sought worldly glory, rather he avoided the limelight and always chose the least place. He preferred to hide behind the cross of our Lord Jesus and was the type of servant to make you feel at ease, always content, preferring not to impose his opinion on anyone. He dealt with the youth with great calmness and humility, gathering everyone around him including those who were difficult to attract to any spiritual activity. It is rare to find a family that does not possess several photos of their childhood and youth with Fr Macarius, and all such photos radiate with his love, warmth, and tenderness. He often participated with the youth in their spiritual and sports activities, playing tennis or soccer with them. He invited the youth for quiet meetings over coffee (his favourite drink), in order to follow up their spiritual progress. He would attend Church camps, spending

days with the youth and children, praying the Liturgy, leading their spiritual meetings, and participating in all their other activities. His presence with them was a source of great joy and attracted many.

In December 1999, His Grace Bishop Suriel was enthroned to the Diocese of Melbourne and Affiliated regions, and from the very beginning, His Grace relied on Fr Macarius and entrusted many services to him. Their close friendship began on a trip to Egypt under the guidance of Fr Daniel El-Antony (now His Grace Bishop Daniel, Abbot of St Shenouda Monastery in NSW). Fr Macarius' quiet and gentle demeanour won him favour among the clergy, the congregation, and His Grace, and he was thus commissioned to assist in the establishment of St Athanasius Theological College. Pioneered by his father, the late deacon Louis Wahba, the Theological College grew under the guidance of His Grace Bishop Suriel and became a recognised teaching institution of the University of Divinity and, for many years, Fr Macarius served as its registrar.

Fr Macarius was elevated to the priestly rank of Hegumen by His Grace Bishop Suriel and His Grace Bishop Asheya on 29th of July 2007. After the departure of the late Very Rev. Fr Victor Rafael in 2008, Fr Macarius was chosen as the Vicar General of the diocese. His Grace elected him to sit on the Clerical Counsel, overseeing marital affairs in place of the late Very Rev. Fr Victor Rafael, and Fr Macarius was also appointed as one of the four trustees of the Diocese. From 2009 to 2018, Fr Macarius held many positions of importance in addition to his duties as a parish priest at St Mary's Church. As part of his duties as trustee, he bore responsibility for the management

of other organisations within the diocese, such as St Mary's College and the Coptic Hostel, and was assigned to liaise with financial institutions and government agencies on behalf of the diocese. In this period, he also accompanied His Grace Bishop Suriel on many visits to various parts of the diocese, including interstate visits, and represented the Church in seminars and conferences overseas. The Lord endowed him with many gifts, facing numerous difficult situations with wisdom and discernment.

Fr Macarius suffered from a severe heart condition, and after many years of toil on earth, on Thursday 27th of August 2020, it was time for our beloved father to rest, and his spirit to transcend, freed from bodily restrictions to rejoice with the heavenly in the life of praise which he loved and lived all his life.

Our precious father, you were a treasure of love, wisdom, and knowledge. We, your children, and brethren the priests, always found in you refuge to comfort a troubled soul and we always found guidance and wisdom in you, always offered in great humility. Your simple spirit, enjoyed by inner calmness, guided you to see solutions and keys to problems that others, drowned in the noise of this world and its tribulations, could not see. How often we would seek your advice, and the Lord would grant comfort in our trials, through you. Indeed, our beloved Fr Macarius, you 'made a Church' around you and within the hearts of

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your children. The Church in Melbourne and many generations are indebted to you, holy father, for your ministry.

Today, we are assured that Fr Macarius is praying that God may grant us this same peace, calmness, and wisdom to navigate this world to the path of eternal life.

May his memory be eternal.

"O Death, where is your sting? O Hell, where is your victory? Christ is risen, and you are overthrown. Christ is risen, and the demons are fallen. Christ is risen, and the angels rejoice. Christ is risen, and life reigns. Christ is risen, and not one dead remains in the grave. For Christ, being risen from the dead, is become the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep."

St. John Chrysostom

A sermon by Fr Macarius Wahba
during his first liturgy at
St Mary's Coptic Orthodox Church,
Kensington, Melbourne.²

1

Let Not Your Heart Be Troubled

The Gospel According to St John 14:1-11

We hear the Lord Jesus Christ talking to His apostles and the disciples saying to them, "I am going to a place where you know and to a way that you know." Christ also warns them saying, "Do not worry and do not let your hearts be troubled. Although I go to Heaven

² Date: The Holy 50 Days of the Joyous Resurrection 15th of Pashons 1709
Sunday 23rd May 1993

– I go to My Father – I have left you something very precious, and that is the work of the Holy Spirit in you. Because I have to go and prepare a place for you there...” This is the whole intention of God’s creation, and this is the complete will of God, that He prepares a place for us so that we may live eternally with Him.

Beautiful are the words of our Lord Jesus Christ to each and every one of us today. “Let not your heart be troubled.” In this day and age, we suffer, we toil, and we go through many problems. Sometimes we think that it is a dead end and that there is no light at the end of the tunnel. Then there is a slight whisper of the Lord Jesus Christ’s words: “let your heart not be troubled. No matter what comes your way, I will be able to stand by you because no problem is too great for Me. Yes, before the world the problem might seem unsolvable, and it might seem impossible to get rid of, but before Me, nothing is impossible.” It is no wonder that the Apostle Paul reminds us that we can do everything through the Lord Jesus Christ who He gives us the strength (Philippians 4:13) – and this is what we are told today. That, it is not us who solve the problem, or us who live day by day, but it is the Lord Jesus Christ who lives in us, giving us strength to be able to take on the day-by-day problems in our lives. In all this, He says to us, “let not your heart be troubled. If a problem comes your way, remember that I am there to help you, I am there to help you overcome the problem. The problem might seem, at the moment, unsolvable but there will come a time and you will not know how, but I will solve it completely and there will be no sign left of it.”

There is a beautiful saying in the Holy Bible that says, “... in the fullness of time” (Galatians 4:4; Ephesians 1:10), and

this shows us that everything has a time in the Lord God's plan, even for the problems that we might face in our lives. The problem might present itself - it might do that severely - and it might hurt many people on the way, but the Lord Jesus Christ says, "I will wipe it away as if it had not existed at all" (Revelation 21:4). "The important thing is that you believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me" (John 14:11; 14:20). "The important thing is that you believe that I am God, and I am able to solve your problem." We are not like other Christian denominations of today that say to us the Lord Jesus Christ is not God. Do not listen to that and do not believe in that. Our Coptic Orthodox belief is that the Lord Jesus Christ is God Himself. He is God Himself because He tells us so about Himself. Today Christ says that - when Philip had asked Him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is sufficient..." He says to him, "[Philip], have I been with you so long...if you have seen Me, you have seen the Father." That is, if you have seen Me, it is like seeing the Father, for I and the Father are one. There is no difference between us at all. This is why He says to us that "[you cannot come] to the Father except through Me," because this is the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. He came to fulfill the will of the Father and to bring us back to His Father. And this is why He says, "I prepare places for you. I will not leave you scattered like lost sheep, but I will gather you just like the hen gathers its chicks under its wing to protect them" (Matthew 23:37; Luke 13:34).

So, today's message is that we should not be troubled, no matter what the problems are. It is no wonder that David the Prophet and King sings aloud and says, "[I will] give thanks to the Lord, because He is good; and His mercy endures forever"

(Psalm 107:1). Give thanks to the Lord because His mercy endures forever, because He has not abandoned us or left us orphans but has always stood by us to protect us and to help us live this daily life. The important thing is that we walk hand in hand with the Lord Jesus Christ. I love the beautiful notes of footprints,³ where the Lord Jesus Christ says, “in the times of trouble I will carry you – I will carry you so that you will not become hurt. I will carry you so that you are able to surpass all the problems.” It is not a matter of difficulty and likewise, not a matter of problem after problem - no. He will say to you, “I will carry you above all these problems. I will carry you so high above them and so blindly above them that you will not become hurt in one way or another.”

There is an underlying and important aspect that we all must remember, that is, we need to believe in Him! He says to us in today’s Gospel, “Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father in Me. Even if you do not want to believe this, because some people will object to this, then believe for the sake of the works that I do.” Who can perform the miracles, who can perform all these wondrous works except for the Lord God - the Lord Jesus Christ Himself?

My dear brothers and sisters, the Lord Jesus Christ is saying to each one of us, “Do not let your heart be troubled.” Do not worry about the littlest of things, just – the important thing – believe in Him, and believe that He is God, that He is Mighty, that He is able to solve all our problems. And then we will all sing aloud with David the Prophet and give thanks to the Lord because we know that His mercy endures forever.

³ Referring to the little print cards of footprints on the seashore with bible passages written on them.

This was what he taught: In all temptation, do not complain about anyone else, but say about yourself, 'These things happen to me because of my sins.'

Abba Or⁴

2

On Complaining⁵

I want to talk to you about complaining particularly considering the book of Acts. Of course, as you all probably know, some of us have complained at one point in our lives or another. You will all also probably agree that complaining does not really solve anything. Most of us would not like to be thought of as complainers, nor would we even like to be associated or around those who are complain a lot. It is not an attractive character trait to have, and sometimes many people are not even aware that they are complaining. Sometimes, they do not know that complaining is quite damaging to the morale of those around them, whether they be family, friends, partner, their colleagues, or even their community... maybe even the church.

⁴ John Wortley, *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2014), 322.

⁵ A youth topic delivered at St Mary's Coptic Orthodox Church for a series titled: "I Quit" on the 6th Week of Pentecost 22nd *Pashons*, 1736; Saturday 30th May, 2020.

Complaining comes from fear. Fear of not thinking we are treated fairly. Fear that we do not have enough. Fear that we are not getting the best we deserve; of not finding the right solutions, or not being recognised for what I do, and so forth. Really, complaining does not edify anyone or anything. It does not show any strength of character - quite the opposite. Complaining does not actually get any point across, and it makes people stop listening rather than to hear you out and see what you have to say. Complaining also does not show responsibility, and it indicates the desire of the person to really put the blame elsewhere - to someone else or to something else. So, it might show that this person has some sort of weakness, insecurity, or low self-esteem, as well as their need for attention, etc. It aggravates a problem, rather than fixes it because when you think about it, complaining might be all talk, whereas problem solving is all action. So how then do we live without complaining?

The book of Acts gives us a bit of insight into this. It begins and ends with a very courageous proclamation of the Gospel. Though translations may differ, from one translation to another, that word “courage” or “boldness” is very clear in the book of Acts. For example, it begins with St Peter and his sermon at Pentecost where he says, “Men and brethren, let me speak freely to you of the patriarch David that he is both dead and buried, and his tomb is with us to this day” (Acts 2:29). Then, the book of Acts ends on a similar note. It talks about St Paul, while he was in Rome, and how he was preaching the Kingdom of God and teaching all things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him

(Acts 28). So, we see this courage, this amazing courage the Apostles had even though they might have faced unspeakable atrocities. In our culture, we cherish the right of 'freedom of speech'. The reason such rights are protected is because speaking freely is not always popular. If you speak your mind, you do not necessarily become a popular person. People do not like to hear an opinion that differs to their own, or a situation that they are not accustomed to or is foreign to them.

Here, the book of Acts gives us many accounts of the boldness of the Apostles. For example, we hear some amazing verses that say, "when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and they perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marvelled" (Acts 4:13). Who are these people, uneducated, yet they speak with all courage? The Book continues, "And they realised that they had been with Jesus." In other words, your courage, my courage, the Apostles' courage comes from our association with the Lord Jesus Christ. We hear this same thing repeatedly. But I wonder then, what made the Apostles so courageous like that? What made them, rather than complain of their harsh treatments, instead, become so courageous? Well, let us have a look together at what made them so courageous, and maybe we could follow their example in that way.

In the first instance, we must understand that the apostles and us all preach the same message. A message that inspires courage. A message that inspires, not to complain about our circumstances, but to stand up and stand strong. That is why we find that in the book of Acts, their preaching, and their courage stems from trying to preach the Lord's resurrection

from the dead. Now, to us, that is something not unusual. We know that the Lord died for us and resurrected, but to these people that we are preaching to, it is something totally foreign. This message, particularly combined with a miraculous healing of a man who had been born lame (Acts 3), greatly annoyed the leaders of the community at that time, particularly those who were known as the Sadducees.

Sadducees at that time did not believe at all in any resurrection, much alone the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. But St Peter and all the Apostles were undeterred. It does not matter what you believe, it does not matter what you want to think, our message is still clear, and our message is still very much undeterred. And that is why we read in Acts - and carefully notice how they speak and to whom they are speaking - that, "Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, 'Rulers of the people and elders of Israel: If we this day are judged for a good deed done to a helpless man...'" *that is the miracle of healing of this lame man*, "by what means he has been made well, let it be known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by Him this man stands here before you whole. This is the 'stone, which was rejected by you builders, which has become the chief cornerstone.' Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4: 8-12).

Imagine the apostles are preaching in the temple, in the place of the Jews, and they are saying to them "...whom you crucified". The apostles are saying to the Jews, "You crucified

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this Lord, you rejected this Lord, you as builders rejected this stone that has become the chief cornerstone.” It is like you and I for example, going to talk about the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, not at a Christian youth meeting, nor to a group of Christians, but we walk accidentally into a synagogue full of hard-line Jews, and say this. Imagine what feeling you would have. Imagine what animosity you would be met with. Imagine how they would look at you. Would you get out of there in one piece or not? It is a very, very difficult situation. Yet, with all audacity, they, rather than complain about how they are being treated or what their circumstances are, preach a message with all courage. And we find that St Peter and all the apostles, because they were witnesses of the resurrection of the Lord, had this passion for the Gospel, and were convinced about what they had seen, were able to preach with all courage and without any fear whatsoever. I wonder if that message should also motivate us to also speak with courage to others about the Lord Jesus Christ - to witness to the Lord Jesus Christ. Even in our society nowadays the resurrection of our Lord and His living presence in our lives, is the key aspect of our Christian life. The resurrection is the key factor of our life, and that should prompt us to share the Gospel with determined courage and with undetermined worry. We should not be afraid at all.

Such courage is needed because we also find opposition in our day and age. At first, these fathers and apostles, they were very popular among the people – in a general way, but as they faced scrutiny from the Jewish leaders and the ruling people, this popularity eventually turned into widespread

hostility. It culminated in the stoning and murder of St Steven, the Archdeacon and first martyr (Acts 7). So, speaking openly about the Gospel carried its risks. We also might carry risks when we speak about the Gospel and when we speak about the Lord Jesus Christ, but it was a risk that the apostles were willing to take. The book of Acts says, "So they called them and commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John answered and said to them, 'Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard'" (Acts 4:18-20). We cannot help but preach the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. I wonder if we can also reach that stage and say, "I cannot help but speak about the Lord Jesus Christ."

There are many places in the world today where if you openly preach Christ this could lead to arrest, to imprisonment and even put to death. Thank God, here in Australia, we do not face that kind of violent resistance. Still, we live in a country or in a culture, particularly the western culture, where there is an increasingly aggressive pre-opposed view toward those who profess Christ as Lord. We need courage to face this opposition, with cheerful courage, cheerful resistance, and cheerful persistence.

When the Christians in Jerusalem heard that the Apostles had been released from prison or released by the rulers they prayed in gratitude to God because God delivered them out of this very difficult situation. They also prayed because they were supplicating God for more encouragement. Their prayer recorded in the book of Acts says, "Now, Lord, look on their

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threats, and grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word, by stretching out Your hand to heal, and that signs and wonders may be done through the name of Your holy Servant Jesus” (Acts 4:29-30). Because they desired to do God’s work, God answered their prayers in an incredible way. We hear that when they had prayed the place where they were assembled, was shaken and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and they spoke the word of God with boldness (Acts 4).

When they spoke in boldness, they did not hold back. You and I serve the same God, and you and I witness and serve the same Gospel. Can we also call upon Him as St Paul also called upon Him? Look at how St Paul actually requests the Ephesians to pray for him, and he says, “please pray for me that utterance may be given to me, that I may open my mouth boldly to make known the mystery of the gospel” (Ephesians 6:19). That was not an easy task for St Peter or for any of the apostles, just like it is not going to be an easy task for you and me, but God will always walk by us in this challenge. That is why it is our duty that with conviction and determination and all courage, we preach the Gospel of Christ.

And then here comes the hard part. How do I apply this in my life? How do I practically apply this courage, rather than complain? The first thing that we should focus on is on our eyes. Do you think the apostles were scared? I think they were terrified, but before the religious leaders, before the opposition, they stood their ground. It is not about how I feel, it is about whether I get my message across or not – if I am convinced about it. This is amazing, even for us in the world today, because the world is full of pressures. There is peer

pressure, there is pressures from society all around us. There are even pressures that we must look and act a certain way. Sometimes we feel that all this pressure around us is taking control of us and at times, almost choking us.

Have you ever felt, for example, that you are living just to try to gain people's approval? Do you ever feel pressured to please people? Does it make you sometimes act in a way that you normally would not? Does it make you behave in a different way? I think one of the most common fears is – for all of us, for all Christians – is the fear of man. We are fearful – of man – we are fearful of each other. Sometimes we act in certain ways or we agree to certain things, or even just remain silent and not proclaim the Gospel because there is pressure on us from other people. That is not what God wants. God wants us to fear Him, not man. For the fear of man may lead us to sin. If you want to please people, we may say or do things, or stay silent just for approval. Does that please God? Absolutely not! This is what St Paul says when he writes to the Galatians, he says, “For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I still pleased men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ” (Galatians 1:10). In other words, if I please men, I am not His servant, I am not worthy to be His servant nor am I fit to be His servant.

So, how do we fight this fear that we have of others i.e., the fear of men? Sometimes we are tempted to fight the fear of man in a wrong way. Sometimes we do this by closing off and not caring about people. We fight this fear of others by having a cold heart toward them. That is not the Christian way. We are called to love humanity, not to be cold toward them. That

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is why we find that in Acts 4:19, St Peter and St John answered the leaders and said, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge." I am not here to please you. If you want to think that that is up to you. They focused their attention on obeying God not the people. One of the reasons we get so scared of people is because we focus on how they might be disappointed or angry at us, and then we have to deal with that, and we forget how then we are going to deal with God, who might also be displeased with us if we are not pleasing Him.

The way then to fight the fear of men without hardening our hearts towards others is by keeping our eyes focused on God, and on pleasing God. That is of utmost importance. When we focus our eyes on God, at the same time, we shrink our fear of man. As we shrink our fear of man, we expand our love for them, and at the same time having our eyes focused on God brings more rejuvenation to be able to continue to do this. If we keep our hearts warm, loving, soft, and caring towards others, then we are fulfilling God's commandment, which is actually a source of courage and a source of strength to you and me as we go on our sojourn in the Christian life.

The apostles also fought the fear of man in another way. The apostles say to God, "... to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done... Now, Lord, look on their threats, and grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word, by stretching out Your hand to heal, and that signs and wonders may be done through the name of Your holy Servant Jesus" (Acts 4: 28-30). Here, they are saying that the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus Christ was part

of the supreme plan of God. The second thing that the Apostles were using to fight this fear of man is suffering as a part of God's plan. Even if there is horrible suffering, God's plan will be completed through this suffering. And this is not a strange thing for the Church, because you and I know very well that people come to know Christ amid persecution.

Remember the amazing story of the twenty-one martyrs of Libya. Twenty of them were Egyptian and Christian, and they all professed the Lord Jesus Christ as they knelt there on the beach just to be slaughtered, and they were told to deny the faith. And they would not. They came to this one guy, whose name was Matthew, they said to him "deny Christ!", he said, "their God is my God." Through seeing his fellow humans being slaughtered, he witnessed for Christ. At a time of oppression, at a time of persecution, that is when people come to know Christ. Our church is a church of martyrs. It is the blood of the martyrs that has watered the church and kept the church alive. It is their witness, which is the essence of the meaning of the word martyr that keeps the church alive until today. Because of opposition, there is an opportunity to show the realness of our faith. It is only in times of persecution that people will come to know the faith. Opposition is sometimes one of God's tools to bring His greatest work to fruition, believe it or not. Sometimes the Lord will use suffering and persecution to make His reality clear to people, and to make His life real before the eyes of people, so that they receive Him.

This is what happened with our fathers the apostles. Look at the courage that they had after the resurrection and after being filled with the Holy Spirit. They were willing to suffer

anything for the sake of fulfilling victory in the Lord Jesus Christ. Remember, if we suffer, then we will also be glorious, and we will be victorious with the Lord. This is what St Paul tells us. He writes to the Philippians and says, “that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead” (Philippians 3:10-11).

Another way then, that you and I may become courageous before the fear of men is focus our eyes on the life of Christ and remember that sometimes God accomplishes His greatest work through our suffering. My friends, when there is suffering, do not look at the frowns of those who are before you – on their faces, but look at God’s smile that He has on His face. We have a beautiful example of this. Look at how they were stoning St Steven alive. Yet St Steven sees the Heavens open, and he sees the glory of God, he sees the Lord sitting at the right hand of the Majesty (Acts 7:55-56).⁶ What a beautiful image to behold, seeing Heaven open before him, while being stoned, while facing persecution.

We also need to focus our life. What do I mean by that? I mean that we must live for what we believe in. Otherwise, what good is it to believe in something that I am not living? Our fathers the apostles, going through opposition and pain, they knew what their life was about. I wonder what your life and my life is about or am I just going through the motions?

⁶ Acts 7:55-56: But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and said, “Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!”

Just going through one day after another, without really knowing what my life is all about. Sometimes our life can become unfocused, and we can become spread very thin, it can become very aimless that we forget our values. We must want to cement our life values. What are the things in your life that are worth fighting for? Values that are worth making a real stand for – do you know, or have you not yet discovered that? I suppose that is why having ‘godly non-negotiables’ in your life is very important. Yes, it might sound very restraining and very restricting, but we must have godly non-negotiables in our lives because that will give us courage. It is only the strong anchor that holds the ship in place. In other words, for our life, having immovable, non-negotiable godly things in our life is the best anchor when the storms arrive. Otherwise, the storms will wipe us out very easily. Are we not going through a huge storm at the moment with this fear that we have around us? This isolation caused by the Covid-19 lockdown? With social distancing, people are afraid to lose their human touch and so forth. There are many storms, and who knows what the future might hold. When we hold onto these godly non-negotiables, we are ready to face these difficult times because you know what you believe, what you stand for, and what you value. That no matter how many waves come and knock you, you will be able to stand against this. There will be no backlash. You will be able to stand against the difficult days, and the most difficult of days that are ahead.

Notice that I am saying here: godly non-negotiables. Not selfish non-negotiables or self-desires. Ultimately our life as Christians should not be for ourselves, it should be for the

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Lord Jesus Christ. St Paul says, "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me" (Galatians 2:20). Our strongest, non-negotiable value should be the glory of Christ – not serving the self. Be careful that your values are not self-centred. No, make sure that you focus your life on non-negotiable values that serve Christ, not serve the self. These can be great anchors for you in life. They can be great values worth fighting for, and even worth dying for, because when you are so convinced about something, and it is something so precious, you will do anything to maintain it and to keep it going. For Sts Peter and John in the book of Acts, they were not willing to back down. No matter what. They were going to preach Christ whether they were dead or alive. Therefore, living for Christ must be a non-negotiable in our Christian sojourn.

Focus your life, and live for what you believe in, instead of just living according to what other people believe in and do not just go with the tide. Stand up, live for what you believe in. Do not fear man, but understand that one day, you will stand only before the Lord God and you will give an account before Him only. Live in that light, and live in the light of that eternity, and live for what you believe in and focus your life on living for what you believe in.

I think there is also another important focus here, and that is to give attention to our community. The book of Acts says, "And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with

the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness” (Acts 4:31). That means that when St Peter and John went out and faced the opposition, afterwards, they came back to the believers, and they all gathered and strengthened one another through prayer. They prayed together. When we pray together, God moves in a powerful way, and He brings miracles upon miracles. Notice here that Sts Peter and John, after they were persecuted, did not pray for comfort for themselves or for ease. They did not say “Lord, look at us and give us healing and give us calmness and give us peace and give us...” etc. Neither did they did not look at themselves. They prayed for courage because they wanted to teach us that this is what the new church was all about. It was about courage to continue, to strengthen one another, to edify one another, and to build one another. We are building blocks and members of the body of Christ. If one person is not well, the whole body becomes unwell. If you or I are not well as members of the body of Christ, the whole body of Christ, then, has a member that is suffering. Therefore, the body is also suffering. So, Sts Peter and John were teaching us that this what the new church was all about – about the community, and about the fellowship – about strengthening one another.

I wonder whether we as a church, if we lose focus and end up fighting one another rather than fighting the enemy – I wonder what would happen. Do we do that in the ministry? I think we all fall short of that. We end up bickering with one another, rather than joining force. The whole church is like a battleship where we are fighting a spiritual war against the enemy. Look at what St Paul says to his disciple Timothy, he

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says, "You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of *this* life, that he may please him who enlisted him as a soldier. And, if anyone competes in athletics, he is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules. The hardworking farmer must be first to partake of the crops. Consider what I say, and may the Lord give you understanding in all things" (2 Timothy 2:3-7). I need to ask myself as a member of the church, and ask others also as members of the church – is there a slack mentality creeping into our hearts as a church? Is there selfishness? Is there faithlessness? Is there lack of repentance? Is there anger? Is there division? Is there strife? Are all these things creeping into we as members of the church?

My friends, we must get over self-interest and self-preservation. Christians are about Christ-interest and not self-interest. Be very, very alert of that. It is not about you and me, it is about *us*. So, let us focus then our community also on Christ's glory rather than on personal comfort.

Let me conclude for you with two passages. One of them is a passage by St Paul, who very beautifully says, "Do all things without complaining and disputing, that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world" (Philippians 2:13-15). But also, I want to mention some words that may be a bit tough, by St Augustine who says, "To be under pressure is inescapable. Pressure takes place through all the world, war, siege, the worries of state. We all know men who grumble under these pressures and complain. They are cowards. They lack

splendour. But there is another sort of man who is under the same pressure but does not complain, for it is the friction which polishes him. It is the pressure which refines and makes him noble.”⁷ Tough words - but very important words. There are pressures all around us, but if we let these pressures take an effect on us and we begin to complain and to grumble, then we might be considered as cowards in the perspective of St Augustine, and we lack splendour. But, if we do not complain under these pressures or under these difficult hardships, then this friction is what polishes us. If we will not crumble under the pressure, then that is what refines and builds within us humility.

May the Lord grant us that we are courageous. That we put aside all complaining and all grumbling, that we may be able to find an antidote if we do complain in our life, and to be able to quit complaining and instead, stand up for what we believe in, what we trust in, what we know, and what will remain forever and into eternity.

⁷ This is an excerpt in context of Augustine’s view of the world as an olive press. He says, “For the world is like an olive press, and men are constantly under pressure. If you are the dregs of oil, you are carried away by the sewer; but if you are the true oil, you remain in the vessel. But to be under pressure is inescapable...” see, Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: a biography*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2013), 291-96; and, Robert Kirchner, “Two responses to Epochal Change: Augustine and the Rabbis on Psalm 137 (136),” in *Vigiliae Christianae* 44, no.3 (1990): 254.

Abba Agathon used to say: "If it were possible for me to find a leper, to give him my body and take on his, I would do it gladly; for that is perfect love."

Abba Agathon⁸

3

To Serve One Another⁹

The Gospel reading according to St Luke (5:17-26)

Today, my beloved, the Gospel speaks to us about the miracle concerning the paralytic who was carried by friends. In the Gospel of St Mark, we are told that these are four friends who brought this paralytic person before the Lord (Mark 2:1-12). It is a beautiful story that teaches us about how we care and how we may serve others. St Paul instructs us in his letter to the Romans saying, "Be of the same mind toward one another" (Romans 12:16). When we look at the example of these men that they have to offer to us, we see how a heart that is full of mercy and full of love can do so much and can bring so many results.

⁸ John Wortley, *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2014), 58.

⁹ Homily delivered at St. Mary's Coptic Orthodox Church, Kensington Melbourne. The Apostle's Fast 14th of *Paone*, 1737; Sunday 21st June 2020.

Without being asked by the paralytic man they carried their friend, and they brought him before the Lord Jesus Christ. I wonder if everyone within our parish, within our Church, would have this kind of spirit. The spirit of service that extends beyond themselves towards others, to care for others even before their own wellbeing. The paralytic would not have been healed otherwise, if it were not for these good friends. It shows us amazingly how good friends can bring a person to the Lord Jesus Christ - can give the person eternal life and make them live a holy and pure life. The opposite is also true, for we are warned in Scripture, "Do not be deceived for bad company corrupts good habits" (1 Corinthians 15:33). And again, the parallel is also true, good company will also bring good habits. I wonder how they overcame all obstacles and never stopped at anything to bring the paralytic before the Lord. You can imagine, maybe what mockery and what difficulty they faced. Imagine going onto somebody's roof, lifting off the tiles, and lowering somebody down on a bed. Just even the sheer ache that they would face, or the hardship that they would face to lower a person from that height down on a bed who was unable to move, would be such a difficult process to do. It was possible for these four men to have come up with any excuses - "it is difficult, there is too many crowds; we cannot get in; the paralytic man did not really ask anything - he did not say anything; we do not know whether he was actually wanting to be healed or not." They could have found any reason in order not to do what they had done. Instead, they overcome every obstacle because their hearts were full of mercy and full of love.

“Be of the same mind toward one another.” You see, my friends, a spiritual person who cares about others will bring many good fruits. A person who lives not to seek their own but to seek the wellbeing of others, will find so many blessings. This is one of the characteristics of love. We are told by St Paul in his first epistle to the Corinthians, that he talks a lot about the great qualities of love, and one of those qualities is that love does not seek its own (1 Corinthians 13:5). In other words, if I have real love, I cannot put myself above others – I cannot even put my wellbeing before others. I must put the wellbeing of others before myself. So, a spiritual person, then, will not consider himself as the goal, but, a means. He is not the centre of this world, drawing all attention to himself or herself at the expense of others, no, he is actually a means to an end, and that means is to serve, to calm, and to look out for others. This is what a spiritual person does because love does not seek its own.

It is necessary to feel that we owe this to others, otherwise, what would make me go beyond measure to serve others? For example, if I think that I am owed something, I will not extend myself to help others, but if I feel that I owe others something, then I will extend myself to help others. That makes a world of a difference because it is necessary for us as Christians and spiritual people to understand that our life is not our own. That the Lord gave me this life in order to serve others – not to be served – but to serve one another. In fact, this is what the Lord Himself did. He said that “the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give Himself as a ransom for the life of others” (Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45). What a

beautiful example then, and especially when we do the same. We are imitating the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. A spiritual person would be abundantly blessed when they reach a stage where they realise that all the resources, all that they know, their talents, even their whole life, is not their own – it is not owned by them but was given to them by God for the sake of others. That would make a huge difference between working for another person, or doing chores for another person, or helping because it is a duty to do some work and help others, and to care for another.

There is a significant difference between working and caring for another person. Working might come out of a necessary requirement that is put upon us, or maybe because we are even paid. However, to care goes beyond even getting any reward back. Caring without a doubt infuses and carries the feeling of love. If we really want to feel the difference between doing some work for another person then being rewarded for it and caring for someone whereby our only rewarded is from the Lord Himself, we will find that there is a significant difference and a warming feeling that comes with it. For us to learn how to care for others, we must remove selfishness from within. We must really separate from our own self-centeredness and look out for the wellbeing of others. Without being asked, we need to look out for what others need. If we have a brother, a sister, a friend, or even a person that we can just merely gather their need of help, and we extend ourselves to them, then it is us who receive a multitude of blessings. A blessing that the Lord Himself promises when he said that if we give somebody a glass of cold water to drink,

the reward of that is not lost (Matthew 10:42; Mark 9:41). Can you imagine? The blessings are much more because you come in touch with the being of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself when you help others.

One of the most beautiful sayings of St John Chrysostom is, "if you do not seek Christ in the beggar on the street, you will not see Him in the chalice upon the altar."¹⁰ If we do not experience Christ with helping others, we are not going to experience Him at the altar. We are not going to experience Him in the Eucharist. The person who cares for others and shows love to others, performs a good work that they do for the Lord, first and foremost, before the other person. So when we are helping out our brother or sister, or mum and dad, or

¹⁰ This quote is a paraphrase of St John Chrysostom's Homily 50.4 on the Gospel of Matthew: "...neither let us account it enough for our salvation, if after we have stripped widows and orphans, we offer for this table a gold and jewelled cup. Rather, if you desire to honour the sacrifice, offer your soul, for which also it was slain and make it to become golden. But, if that (your soul) remains worse than lead or potter's clay, while the vessel is of gold, what is the profit? Let not this therefore be our aim, to offer golden vessels only, but to do so from honest earnings likewise. For these are of the sort that is more precious more than gold - these that are without injuriousness. For the church is not a gold foundry nor a workshop for silver, but an assembly of angels. Wherefore it is souls which we require, since in fact God accepts these for the souls' sake. That table at that time was not of silver nor that cup of gold, out of which Christ gave His disciples His own blood, but precious was everything there, and awful, for that they were full of the Spirit. Would you do honour to Christ's body? Neglect Him not when naked; do not you, while here honour Him with silken garments, neglect Him perishing when in cold and nakedness. For He that said, 'This is my body,' and by His word confirmed this fact and said, 'You saw me hungry, and did not feed me' and, 'Inasmuch as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it to me.' For this (the table) indeed needs not coverings, but a pure soul, and that requires much attention." For the reprinted edition of the Migne's PG 57-58, see Frederick Field, *S. Joannis Chrysostomi Homiliae in Matthaeum* I-III (Cambridge, 1839), 63-63.

any stranger for that matter, we are doing it for the person of the Lord Jesus Christ because He promised us this and says: "If you do this to the least of these, my brethren, you have done it to Me" (Matthew 25:40). How beautiful it would be for us to grow in this virtue of serving others. I wonder if we could reach the stage where every ounce of energy that we have, or every capability, or every talent, or any moment that we have is given for others. That would be an amazing thing to achieve.

There is a beautiful story told to us about a person who had done just that. His name is St Peter the worshipper or St Peter the slave.¹¹ His story is incredible because it tells us that he was a very wealthy and rich man, but he was greedy in what he had and would not share with others. He had another person that lived next door to him that was a poor man, and this poor man had absolutely nothing. From time to time, this poor man would beg to Peter when the delivery man for the bread would come, in order to receive a loaf of bread. St Peter would get very upset from this beggar and he would not give him anything. One day, he was so frustrated that he took one of the loaves of bread and threw it at his neighbour, just to get rid of him. He said, "Here take it and go and leave me alone." But then, that night, he had an amazing dream. St Peter dreamt that he had died and had ventured into Heaven. The scales were put out to weigh what he had done and what he had not done. Then he started to see that the angels were confused and perplexed. They did not know what good works to bring. But one angel quickly went and got a loaf of bread and put it in the scale of the good works of St Peter, because that was the

¹¹ Departure of St Peter the Worshiper, 25th of Tubah.

only thing that could be counted for him. Even though he took the bread, and he threw it at the man to get rid of him, it was still counted for him as good. That was the only good work that was counted for him. He woke up in fright, feeling that his life needs to change. Then we see how much he extends himself in order to serve others, to the extent that he sells all his possessions to work for the sake of others without any reward. When he had nothing else to give, he went and sold himself as a slave in order to use that money to give to others and to help others, and that is why he was known as St Peter the Slave.

I wonder whether a spiritual person can reach that level and devote his or her life for the sake of others. Sometimes we do that to strangers, but we forget to do it with our own households. The Lord would say here, “hang on... if you do not care about your own household, first and foremost, then what good is it if you do it to others outside of your own household?” It is important that we know that we are rewarded when we serve both those close to us, those who are far from us, those who we do not know. Our service must be to others. It is important that I look out for the wellbeing of my own household just as much as I look out for the wellbeing of others.

The Bible instructs us that if we do not do this, then we will be held in accountable. In the day of judgement, the Lord will also look at our good works towards others and take that into account in our judgement. It is a frightening thing, but it is also a blessing. For this reason, “Be of the same mind toward one another.”

The Lord will come and ask me one day: "Where is Abel your brother?" (Genesis 4:9) Remember in the days of the Old Testament, that Cain was asked this question. He said to him, "Where is Abel your brother?" and Cain was a bit upset, he said "Am I my brother's keeper? Do I have to look out for my brother?" And the Lord said, "Yes, you must look out for your brother." One of these days my siblings will need my help, and if I do not extend a helping hand to them, the Lord will say, "You did not look after your own." We must look after each other not only in a physical sense but in a spiritual sense as well, because we are all in effect brothers and sisters of one another.

My friends, let us learn from these men who carried this paralytic man and brought him into the bosom of our Lord Jesus Christ to be healed and to have his sins forgiven. Let us learn from them how to have a real care and love in serving others. May our Lord provide us with His grace and blessings for the power and work of the Holy Spirit who abides in us and in the Church, so that we are able to care and serve others.

Abba Alonius said, "Unless a person says in his heart: "I alone and God are in the world" he will not experience repose.

*Abba Alonius*¹²

4

Troubled Hearts¹³

The Gospel Reading according to St John (14:1-11)

We are told about a particular type of heart that might be troubled. One of the leading causes of death in the world today is heart conditions – or medical conditions for the heart. This morning we are told about a different kind of heart trouble. A type that afflicts the very centre of our being and our personality. This kind of heart trouble can come to anyone; it can come to a young person or to an old person, it can come to a good person or to a bad person – no one is immune to it. And it is even amazing that we see that our Lord Jesus Christ Himself was not immune to it. He was troubled in heart by what He had to carry on behalf of humanity. Of course, there is nothing wrong with having

¹² John Wortley, *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2014), 71.

¹³ A homily delivered at St Mary's Coptic Orthodox Church, Kensington, Melbourne. The Holy 50 Days of the Joyous Resurrection 16th of *Pashons*, 1736; Sunday 24th May 2020.

a troubled heart. It is a part of life. What is important is how do we deal with this troubled heart when it does come. For this, we need to make use of the right remedy, which our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the great Physician, gives to us and freely displays to us in this blessed morning.

In context, the Lord Jesus Christ was celebrating the last supper with His disciples and the apostles. He was sharing with them His final moments here on earth, in the physical sense. He told them that He would soon have to leave them. Naturally, they were all troubled; they all felt quite fearful and quite anxious. Their hearts were troubled, and things seemed uncertain. They did not know what the future holds for them. Why should their Master leave them after having spent all this time with them? Why could He have not stayed longer with them? What will become of them once He leaves? How will they endure the persecution of the Jews, and face all these difficult troubles? I think most of us are no strangers to questions of this nature. No matter what the situation is that we come across, the question sometimes remains with us, that troubles us, *is*: why must this happen? Where is God in all this? Why cannot things simply remain the way that they have been always? Whenever we feel that the walls of life are sort of collapsing around us or closing in on us, and feelings of entrapment permeate us, we need to remember the kind and compassionate words of our Lord Jesus Christ which he says to each and every one of us, “Let not your heart be troubled, you believe in God, believe also in Me” (John 14:1). And how important are those words, especially for us in this time and age.

What does it mean “let not your hearts be troubled?” I suppose the Lord here is saying, “stop being troubled in spirit,

set your heart at ease, make sure that you keep on believing, and that you keep on trusting in the Lord." It is as if He is saying, "Keep looking up toward Heaven and toward Me. Never ever give up hope because there is a solution for every troubled heart." Our Lord Jesus Christ gives us some beautiful remedies of how we can face troubled hearts when they do come. This is a great source of encouragement for us. The first thing is that we must remember where our eternal home is, and that it is with the Lord Jesus Christ. He says to us clearly, "In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto Myself; that where I am, there you may be also" (Jn 14:2-3). So if you ever feel discouraged because you feel that there is no permanent rest or permanent place for you to rest in this world, remember that our compassionate Lord has promised to provide us with a permanent home one day – in His own very personal home.

I suppose it makes us look forward to the day that Lord returns. That awesome and glorious day that we all await so that we can live and abide in Heaven with Him forever. If we think about Heaven, some people might say, "I wish I can only just make it through those doors. Or some people say I wish that I would sit at the feet only of Christ. I wish that I would be only at a distance but just as long as I am in Heaven." But the Lord promises us nothing short of His own personal throne. He says, "those who are victorious, I shall give to sit on My throne just as I was victorious and sat on My Father's throne" (Revelation 3:21). This is what the Lord wants to provide for each one of us. How awesome would that day be? I guess what makes heaven such a wonderful place is that there will be no sorrow, there will be no pain, there will be no tears or suffering, or no more

sin, (Revelations 21) but what really makes Heaven, Heaven, and makes it beautiful is that we will be there with the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. Imagine – in person! No longer able just to believe with the heart or with the mind but there in person, fully perceptible to each one of us. To dialogue with Him, to touch Him, to see Him clearly with all our perception. This is going to be the greatest, and it is the life that we are living with Him. What makes Heaven really Heaven is that we abide with the Lord Jesus Christ and He is there. Does this not comfort our hearts? Knowing that no matter what difficulty might come in this world, that one day we will be with the Lord Jesus Christ in a wonderful home that He prepares for you personally. There is a better life. There is a better day. There is a new start. There is an eternal place awaiting all of us.

This comforting thought can really remove fear from any heart. What can come against us then, that can stand against these comforting thoughts? It will not stop our heart from being troubled, but at least it will make our circumstances much more bearable, and able to deal with them in a much better way. Keep focused on your eternal home that is with the Lord Jesus Christ.

But the Lord gives us also another encouraging remedy that we can use during difficult and troubled times. This is our privilege in knowing God through Jesus Christ, that is, our belief in the Lord Jesus Christ. Whenever our hearts are troubled it is always encouraging to know that there is someone we can turn to. Someone that I can run to and get onto my knees, plead with Him, and pray to Him. The best person who can help me achieve this, is He Himself. Somebody might say, “How can I come to the Lord Jesus Christ if I do not know Him personally? How can I be

able to come and speak to a stranger that I have not met before or that I have not spoken before, or that I do not know anything about?" That is why it is important that we understand what the Lord here is saying to us. He is saying that we must believe in Him, have a fellowship with Him – that way, when I know that things are difficult, I know that there is a Saviour there looking out for me and ready to help me.

You see, it is so important that when the Lord says, "I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6) that we understand what this means. Notice that He is not saying, "I will show you the way to the Father." No, He said, "I am the way." Notice that He is not saying to you, "I will teach you what the truth is about", rather, He is saying, "I am the truth". Also know that He is not saying "I will give you life." He says, "I am the life." In other words, He is our full source of existence – now and always, and forever. He is the very reason for our reality because He is the way and the truth and the life. He is then the only means to the Father. We cannot come to know God in any other way except in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Some people are now saying that it is very narrow minded to think that the only way to God is through Jesus Christ. Even some Christian denominations preach this and say that there could be other ways of salvation. How ignorant would we be if we think there was any other way to God the Father except in the Lord Jesus Christ? I liken it to somebody who wants to send a letter to a friend. Can they just put any address on this letter? Will the letter get there? Of course not! They must get the address from the person himself or know the exact source

and the reliability of the address from the person to that friend they are sending the letter. Once they have the right address, they put it on there, and are assured that the letter will get there. It is the same with our case, we come to know God in the Lord Jesus Christ, because He Himself is the one who teaches us how to love Him and how to abide with Him. This is made very clear, when He says, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, 'Show us the Father?' Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me? The words that I speak to you I do not speak on My own authority; but the Father who dwells in Me does the works. Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father in Me..." (John 14:9-11). There is no greater source of encouragement when we face difficulties than to know God Himself personally. Not as a community, not as a congregation but as an individual on a personal and intimate level. He is everything that we need for every kind of need that we may come across.

My dear friends, let us remember on this blessed morning and during these times that people are facing many difficulties of one way or another. Let us remember that there are remedies for our troubled hearts. Let us be encouraged that we have an eternal home in heaven that awaits us, and to look forward to that. Let us also be encouraged by our own personal relationship with God in Jesus Christ – an intimate and personal relationship, believing and trusting in Him totally that He is able to help us, no matter our difficulties. May our Lord grant us that we apply these words for His glory and for our eternity.

If the mind does not sing along with the body, its labour is in vain. For if a person love affliction, it later becomes joy and repose for him.

Abba Elijah¹⁴

5

The Path of Adversity¹⁵

How do we stay on track through adversities? I suppose one of the greatest challenges for any Christian person, in particular a young Christian person, is how to deal with adversities when they come our way. To begin with, scripture uses the term adversity interchangeably with other words. Sometimes we hear of it as “adversities”, “tribulations”, “trials”, and even “temptations.” All these words are interchangeable.

We have all had “bad days” or “bad years” where it seems like nothing is going our own way. Sometimes you wonder and think, “why does the Lord allow this?” Hopefully, the answer to that will become clearer.

No matter what type of adversity or trial we go through, generally, they are accompanied by a difficult time, or a time of suffering. If we remember what scripture says to us, then we will be able to continue during that difficult time. We need

¹⁴ John Wortley, *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, (St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2014), 114.

¹⁵ The Nativity Fast 22nd Hathor, 1735; Saturday 1st December 2018

to remind ourselves, for example, that the Lord says to us, “he who endures to the end shall be saved” (Matthew 24:13). Adversity requires endurance and it needs persistence. We can even remember what St Peter says in his epistle, “Therefore let those who suffer according to the will of God commit their souls to Him in doing good, as to a faithful Creator” (1 Peter 4:19).

When we are passing through adversity, and we have committed ourselves to God, we know and are confident that we are in faithful hands – in trustful hands. It is important for us to keep in mind, and to make a very clear note about what St Paul says to distinguish between sufferings and the eternal glory that is to come. He says in his epistle to the Romans, “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18). When we are patient, all these adversities, all these difficult times, all these sufferings will account for us as glory in Heaven.

St James gives us some very helpful words about what the Christian needs to do when they are faced with adversities, trials, tribulations, or temptations. He says, “Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him. Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am tempted by God’; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death” (James 1:12-15). Sin, when it is

full grown, brings forth death.

There are three types of temptations. The first type is temptations or trials that come to us from Satan. They are forced on us by Satan. He even did this with the Lord Jesus Christ Himself when he came to tempt Christ in the wilderness after the Lord had fasted for forty days and forty nights. And of course, the Lord is victorious over Satan (Matthew 4:1-11; Mark 1:11-13; Luke 4:1-14). And Satan did the same thing with our forefathers – with Adam and Eve (Genesis 3). But of course, our forefather, Adam, and Mother Eve failed at this temptation or this trial.

These kinds of trials that come to us from Satan, if endured, can result in a lot of good for our spiritual lives. These adversities are experiences, and just like in the world, if you go for a job interview or you go for a new job, it must be about what experience you have. The more experience you have, usually the better your chances are. Well, it is the same in the spiritual life. The more experience we have through adversity, the more we know where Satan is coming to attack us from. You will be prepared, and you will distinguish the evil thoughts that are coming from Satan. Maybe we can even reach the magnitude of Abba Antony the Great who says, “I do not think that Satan has tempted me with the same sin twice.”¹⁶ Why would he say that? It is because from the first time he endured this temptation he learned from it. He was prepared for the

¹⁶ A paraphrase of: “Abba Antony also said, ‘God does not allow the same warfare and temptations to this generation as he did formerly, for men are weaker now and cannot bear so much.’” See #23 in Benedicta Ward, *The sayings of the Desert Fathers: the alphabetical collection*, (Mowbray, 1981), 6.

next time that it comes to him.

When we look at somebody like the righteous David in the Old Testament, for example, we find that he fell into some of the worst sins you can imagine, only when there were no trials – when there was no adversity. Remember, David was a man of war. When he used to go out and lead the army in war, he was always prepared for the enemy. When he started to relax and to sit on his balcony or on the rooftop, his eyes began to gaze toward Bathsheba, and he fell into sin with her.

But there are also trials that we bring upon ourselves, and Scripture is very clear about this. Again, St James says to us, “Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members?” (James 4:1) So, sometimes we bring a trial upon ourselves or we bring an adversity upon ourselves. We might put it in our mind that we want to commit a particular act. When we put ourselves in that position, then I only have myself to blame because I have put myself in that scenario. I cannot blame Satan, and I cannot blame the Lord for it. You know, if we quickly just go through how sin develops in our life, I think it might make things a bit clearer how we can fight it.

Sin is a development. Let me read with you quickly two verses from James to refresh your mind about how sin develops in our life: “But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death” (James 1:14-15). So, the first stage of sin is temptation – or the first stage of how sin develops is temptation or lust. In

some other translations, it is called desires, or when you have an enticement, that is when you have an opportunity or an encouragement to satisfy that desire. If we want to put it into a mathematical formula, it would be: Temptation equals desire plus opportunity. Let me give you an analogy. Imagine a small boy who is tempted to steal some cookies from the cookie jar. This is the desire here – he desires those cookies. When no one is looking, there is the opportunity. So, if he has got the opportunity and the desire, then the temptation arises. This is the first stage - temptation.

The second stage in the development of sin is the actual sin itself. Temptation will only lead to sin when you yield to it and you act upon it. If that boy puts his hand in the cookie jar and takes the cookies, that is when sin starts to happen. He has acted upon the desire, temptation, and opportunity. Thus, sin equals desire plus opportunity, plus action. It is actually the consequences of ‘unforgiven sins’ i.e., if I do not repent from a sin. That is of course, as the Bible says to us, that the result is death (Romans 6:23). This refers to spiritual separation from God because the wage of sin is death. Ultimately then, such death will involve also eternal punishment which will then equal the desire plus the opportunity plus the action, and no forgiveness. If there is no forgiveness for sin, then it becomes a punishment – a punishable act. That is how sin develops.

There is even a third one, which is very important and that is the trials, or the adversities, that come to us with permission from God. Can you believe that? God will allow this to happen. But these have certain aims to them. God will allow them

because they impart a certain aim to the believer. Let us have a look at some examples. Maybe the Lord wants to test us like He did with our father Abraham. Imagine, He went to Abraham and said, "Abraham, take your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and offer him to me as a burnt offering" (Genesis 22:2). What a test, what an incredible test. The Lord was testing Abraham's love for Him. Maybe the Lord will allow a certain adversity because He wants to test our love, or He wants to test us. Maybe also, the Lord wants to purify me from something that is wrong in my life. This becomes very clear to us from the example of Job in the Old Testament. Listen to what Job says regarding God, "But He knows the way that I take; *when* He has tested me, I shall come forth as gold" (Job 23:10). God wants to purify you and I from something that is an impurity in our life. He wants to put us into that furnace, like we do with gold, to make very precious and expensive gold – something that is very pure. Or perhaps, God wants to prepare us for something later – an issue that we might face - and that is why He is allowing us that adversity to come our way in order to strengthen us. He is preparing me for something later, like He did with the righteous Joseph in the Old Testament. Imagine, this poor man, Joseph, was sold by his brothers. He was tempted by his master's wife; he was cast into prison falsely; he endured all this because the Lord was preparing him for something else later. The Lord prepared him to rescue his brothers, the land of Egypt, and all the surrounding districts at that time from hunger and famine that was going to last for seven years. So maybe the Lord is preparing you for something.

It could be that the Lord is chastising us, and this happens very clearly and in Scripture. When He chastises us, it does not mean He does not love us, - on the contrary, it means that He loves us very much. This is why, for example, we hear read in scripture, "For whom the LORD loves He corrects" (Proverbs 3:12), also we hear in Hebrews, "For whom the LORD loves He chastens" (Hebrews 12:6), "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore, be zealous and repent" (Revelation 3:19), and finally, "Behold, happy is the man whom God corrects; therefore, do not despise the chastening of the Almighty. For He bruises, but He binds up; He wounds, but His hands make whole" (Job 5:17-18). This is the Lord correcting. Who likes to be chastised? Nobody likes to be chastised, whether young or old. That is why St Paul in his letter to the Hebrews, says, "Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it" (Hebrews 12:11). When we have been chastened or chastised, we do not like it, but afterward it will bring a peacefulness into our heart, it will bring the fruit of righteousness into our life because we have been trained by it. So maybe the Lord is chastising us.

Perhaps the Lord is allowing a difficulty to come our way because He wants us to be humble and to have a contrite heart. This happened with St Paul the Apostle himself. He used to see so many miracles, and so many revelations, and this is what he says, "And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure" (2 Corinthians 12:7). He had a disease, or he had a

sickness that the Lord allowed to come into his body, so that way he does not become proud, instead, becomes humble and contrite in heart.

Sometimes, the Lord has allowed an adversity or difficulty to come into my life because He wants me to resort to Him, to cry out to Him, and to come back to Him in repentance. David the Prophet felt this. That is why in many of the beautiful writings of the Psalms, we hear this clearly being said by David. In one of those Psalms, he says, “In my distress I called upon the LORD, and cried out to my God; He heard my voice from His temple, and my cry came before Him, even to His ears” (Psalm 18:6).

You see, my dear friend, adversities or trials or temptations or tribulations are good for us. Believe me, they are good for us, because they are a fellowship of love in the sufferings of our Lord Jesus Christ and in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. We do not grow when things are easy, we only grow when we face challenges. If you want to go to the gym to build up your body, you need to put those muscles in strain and actually work those muscles, in order for those muscles to repair, heal, and become stronger – and that is how you develop your muscles.¹⁷ We do not grow when things are easy, we only grow when we face challenges. We are the direct object of these trials and of these adversities. The Lord wishes you to be a better person for it, when He allows difficulties to come your way.

¹⁷ Fr Macarius makes a side comment here to the young men: “Yes, I can see all the young men smiling, because they know that it is painful, it is hard work – you cannot walk, and you cannot move afterwards – but you know that the results are going to be there.”

It is no wonder that St Paul, the first hermit, who only left us this one beautiful quote, "Whoever flees from temptation flees from God."¹⁸ So, if you flee from temptation, trial, or adversity then you are fleeing from God because God has allowed this to happen. And, another beautiful saying by St Simon the Stylite, who used to live on a big column to try and get away from people, says, "If God desired to take away the temptation, He would have done so. Instead, He desires your benefit. Therefore, be thankful at all times."¹⁹ Do not flee from the trial or from the adversity because God desires that you become a better person. He has allowed this to be in your life.

We as Christians, must never give an excuse for yielding into temptation. Sure, the temptations will always be there, whether we yield to them or not, that is up to you and it is something that comes back to you. We should never make an excuse for ourselves and say, "Yes, everybody else allows the temptation to come into their life and falls in it", and then we can throw the towel in and become lax. No, look what St Paul says, "No temptation has overtaken you except such as is

¹⁸ This statement is only attributed as the only saying of Abba Paul the Hermit in the Arabic tradition (حقاً من يهرب من الضيقة يهرب من الله). Cf W.H. Fremantle, G. Lewis and W.G. Martley, trans., *The Life of Paulus the First Hermit: From Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, Vol. 6, edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1893).

¹⁹ This is a translation of the Arabic saying attributed to St Simeon: لا تتحل في الشدائد لكن: مرضه عالما انه أراد رفعها عنك فانما يريد نفعك فأشكره علي كل شيء Stylites, see: Richard M Price, "Theodoret of Cyrrhus: A History of the Monks of Syria." *Cisterican Studies* 88 (1985); Translation of the Syriac text, see Frederick Lent, "The life of Saint Simeon Stylites: a translation of the Syriac text in Bedjan's Acta martyrum et sanctorum." Vol. iv. *Christian Roman Empire series* 7 (2008). For more of his sayings in Arabic, see Bishop Epiphanius, bustān āl-rubān (Paradise of the Fathers), St Macarius Monastery, 2014), 277-285.

common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it" (1 Corinthians 10:13). Temptation is there, but He will not give it to us beyond what we are able to handle, but with temptation, He will give us the way to escape. The best way to escape is that of the Lord Jesus Christ who said, "I am the way, the truth and the life." That is why God will protect the believer by not allowing too great a circumstance to come into his or her life. When the opportunity comes for an adversity, trial, temptation, and it arises, do not act upon it because we know that we are not alone during this time. St Paul says, "For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted" (Hebrews 2:18). In other words, while you are suffering, Christ is suffering along with you. While you are tempted, Christ is tempted along with you. While you are going through the trial, Christ considers the trial His own trial because He is there with you. He can aid those who are tempted.

Even if we make a mistake and fall into this trial or temptation, and submit to it, we need to seek forgiveness from the Lord. We need to seek the godly life, because the Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of temptations and to reserve the unjust under punishment for the day of judgement. That is what scripture tells us. If we are living a life of righteousness and being godly in our life then God will deliver us out of the temptation, trial, or adversity. But if we want this temptation to happen in our life, the Lord is not going to impose His will upon us, He will allow us to do

what we want. Always remember, that even if we do fall into any difficulty, then know that there is a beautiful door of the sacraments that is open to us.

The Lord opens for us the door of the sacraments whereby we can come and confess our sins and repent to be united to His body and blood. Remember that St John tells us, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). This is His promise. There is no way He is going to go back on that. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Let me share with you two beautiful quotes that show us the thought of the desert fathers about all the difficulties that we face. One of them is written by St John Climacus who says, "He who truly loves God is devoted to His holy will and no matter what might befall him, he accepts everything as from the hand of God with a firm faith that all this serves to his spiritual benefit. For the soul that is devoted to God and the fortunes that befall it in this life serve as steps leading it up to perfection."²⁰ When we go through these trials, we are on our way toward a life of perfection. St John Chrysostom says, "If you suffer many trials, do you suppose that God has left you and that He despises you? If you do not suffer, truly then, He has left you."²¹

²⁰ John Climacus, *The ladder of divine ascent* Vol. 286, trans., Norman Russel, (New York: Paulist Press, 1982).

²¹ The full quote is: "You endure chastisement (St Paul says); not for punishment, nor for vengeance, nor for suffering. See, from that from which they supposed they had been deserted [of God], from these he says they may be confident, that they have not been deserted. It is as if he had said, because you have suffered so many evils, do you suppose that God has left you and hates you? If you did not suffer, then it is right to suppose this. For if He scourges every son whom He receives, he who is not scourged,

Let me then give you some keys that you can use during trials, tribulations, or adversities. Keep these keys in mind because they work; they are like master keys - they can work at any door. Who of us resorts to the key of *prayer and fasting* when a difficulty comes our way? It is a very strong key to use because through prayer and fasting we can face any problem. Look at what David says in his psalms quoting God, "Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me" (Psalm 50:15). When we call upon the Lord through prayer, the Lord will answer our prayer. The church has always been accustomed to dealing with difficulties and with tribulations by prayer and fasting. You remember the beautiful story of St Peter when he was in prison, it was because of the prayers of the Church on his behalf that he was released (Acts 12). We all know the moving of the Muqattam Mountain. We all know that it happened through fasting and prayer.²² You see, the Lord was not lying to us when He said when a difficult situation arises that "this kind cannot come out by nothing but prayer and fasting" (Mark 9:29). When difficulties are there

perhaps is not a son. What then, you say, do not bad men suffer distress? They indeed suffer; how then? He did not say, *everyone who is scourged is a son*, but *every son is scourged*. For in all cases He scourges His son: what is wanted then is to show, whether any son is not scourged. But you would not be able to say: there are many wicked men also who are scourged, such as murderers, robbers, sorcerers, plunderers of tombs. These however are paying the penalty of their own wickedness, and are not scourged as sons, but punished as wicked: but you as sons." See Saint John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Epistle to the Hebrews: Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, Vol. 14, ed., by Philip Schaff, (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1889.)

²² For two ancient sources, see: B Evetts, ed., *History of the Patriarchs of the Egyptian Church by Sawirus al-Muqaffa'*, vol. ii, part ii, Khael III to Shenoute II 880-1066, in *Patrologia Orientalis*, vol. I.2, I.4, V.1 (1906-15); and B Evetts, ed., *The Churches and Monasteries of Egypt and Some Neighbouring Countries, Attributed to Abū Ṣāliḥ the Armenian*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1895).

then these difficult times can be passed through prayer and fasting.

Along with prayer, ask for an intercession of your intercessor, or your favourite saint. He can fight along with you during that difficulty. With your own private prayer and your fasting, resort to the power of the altar; that is, the sacrament, because the altar can solve so many things. When we come to commune in the body and blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, this gives me the opportunity and the ability to be able to face circumstances. Christians are not going to have an easy life, but Christians have a 'know-how' of how to face difficulties through the dwelling of the Holy Spirit that is in them and also through being united to the flesh and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, an important key is the key of *prayer and fasting*.

There is another key, and that is the key of *promises*. What do I mean by promises? We need to remember the promises that God makes to us in Scripture. There are some beautiful ones. Imagine He says to you, "for I am with you, and no one will attack you to hurt you" (Acts 18:10). Is this not a promise to you? Is this not a promise when He says, "Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go" (Genesis 28:15). What a beautiful promise. Is this not a promise when He says to you, "Come to Me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). Imagine, if you keep those promises clear in your mind when there is any difficulty, how much easier it will be to handle that difficult time. I urge you, to, write down all these promises, underline or highlight them in your bible, and keep them on your phones to know that these

promises are for you personally. They are said by the Lord for you personally. So, there is also the key of *promises*.

There is also the key of *trust*. We should trust and know that God is able to change everything for the better. Imagine if we could say with Job the Righteous, after all that he went through – and Job faced things that are unimaginable, “I know that You can do everything, and that no purpose of Yours can be withheld from You” (Job 42:2). Imagine, if in these difficulties we say to the Lord, “I know that You can do everything, I trust in You.” Say to yourself, “All things are possible to Him who believes,” (Mark 9:23) and say, “with men it is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (Matthew 19:26; Mark 10:27).

Likewise, the key of *hope*. Know that there might be a door that is shut before you, but that God has so many keys for all those shut doors. You might not be able to see how you are going to open those doors, but God can see how He is going to open them. Remind yourself of what the Lord says in the book of Revelation, “See I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it...” (Revelation 3:8) If the Lord is ready to open that door, He will open it, and no one will be able to shut it for you. Do not look at the closed doors that are in front of you, but know that in the hand of God, there is a key. You might not see it; you might not understand how it is going to be done but know then that God can open any door before you. Even if God has delayed somewhat in solving a problem or solving an issue, remind yourself of the beautiful verse in the psalms where it says, “Wait on the Lord; be of good courage, and He shall strengthen your heart. Wait, I say, on the Lord!” (Psalm 27:14) Wait and be patient. Do not run things to your own

agenda but let God's timing run your affairs. Do not enforce your own timing upon God but let God run it in the time that He sees fit.

Then, there is the key of *eternity*. If we focus on our eternal life, this will make the adversity so much lighter. It will lift our hearts to Heaven to be able to know the treasure that awaits us. St Paul says, "For our light affliction..." *he calls it light affliction – all that he went through, he calls it light affliction...* "which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory" (2 Corinthians 4:17). When we look to our eternity, we say, "Lord, I can bear this because if You were able to bear it, then with Your help, and in You, I can do all things." It is Christ who strengthens me.

Those are the five keys: The key of prayer and fasting, the key of promises, the key of trust, the key of hope, and the key of eternity. With these spiritual keys you will be able to stay on track during any adversity.

Always remember, my dear friend, that your character should be much stronger than any circumstance that you go through. It is not the circumstance that is stronger than you, but you are stronger than the circumstance. You cannot always control what comes your way or what happens to us, but do you know what you can control? You can control how you choose to respond and how you react to any situation. If somebody comes and bothers me, I can either submit to that circumstance, and let the circumstance become stronger than I am, or I can become stronger than that circumstance and say, "You know what, I am pretty thick-skinned." You do not have to say it out loud to them because they might pester you a little longer but you, in your core, think to yourself, "I cannot control

how it comes at me, but I can control how I can react to it." Always remember that in those moments of difficulty, if we stop complaining, and start to give thanks for the good that is in my life, it makes the bad things seem so light and much more bearable. When we look at a glass cup that is half full, it is much better than looking at it as half empty. Always keep a positive attitude with a thankful heart regardless of how difficult things are.

St Paul tells us, "Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). Therefore, remember that your character must be stronger than the circumstance.

Likewise, remember that your struggles will lead to strength. Every difficulty that you face in your life, whether big or small is something that God will use to produce more strength, more faith, more perseverance in you, if you let Him. It is to your advantage. In other words, all your pain has a purpose, and it is not futile. Again, St Paul writes to the Romans saying, "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to *His* purpose" (Romans 8:28). Even if things seem bad, God knows your love for Him, and He will allow it to be for your good. Let your struggles remind you that you will become stronger. Your struggles always will lead to strength.

Continually know that God's timing is always perfect. God's plans are always almost different to ours. The only difference is His plans are perfect, and ours are not. Sometimes we think

we may know better than God, and at that point, God may say, “Okay, you have it.” But then afterwards, you realise and say, “That is not what I wanted – it is no longer important to me, it is no longer suitable for me... I should have waited... I should have thought about it more.” Have patience to wait on His timing instead of forcing our own timing upon Him. If we force our will onto His, He will allow it, but then we suffer the consequences. God speaks to us through the book of Jeremiah and says, “For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope” (Jeremiah 29:11). How beautiful is that? These are the plans that God has for each one of us. God’s timing is always perfect.

Lastly, God will never leave your side. He is there at the very time of your worst adversary or even in the slightest adversary. He is there looking out for you. You might feel that you are going through something all alone, but you know what, sometimes you are alone, but on the human level ... on the divine level, you have God there with you. At the very moment, call out to Him, He will be there by your side ready to help you. So never lose hope.

Let me conclude with you with this beautiful verse from the book of Deuteronomy, which says, “Be strong and of good courage, do not fear nor be afraid of them; for the LORD your God, He *is* the One who goes with you. He will not leave you nor forsake you” (Deuteronomy 31:6). My dear friend, do not let the adversary take away from you good things, but let the adversary add onto your goodness and onto your righteousness. By doing this, we are staying on track through the most difficult of adversities.

"Lord, you know that it is not through malice that I do not believe and so that I may not err through ignorance, reveal this mystery to me, Lord Jesus Christ."

*Abba Arsenius.*²³

6

The Mystery of the Eucharist²⁴

We all know about the Eucharist – we all take it, we all love it, we have all sometimes got into the habit of doing it day-in, day-out, or on a weekly basis. But let us understand the Eucharist a little more. Why is it a mystery? Why do we believe in the real presence of the Lord Jesus Christ in the elements that we use in the liturgy? We will look at the words that the Lord Jesus Christ Himself spoke about this and what they mean. This is an important topic for our own faith to be strengthened in this amazing mystery, and to be witnesses in order to answer people who might have objections about this mystery. Some Christian denominations do not believe in the real presence of the Lord Jesus Christ in this mystery, but they believe that it is only symbolic or that it is observed to commemorate the Lord Jesus Christ.

²³ Quoted by Abba Daniel. Wortley, *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 91.

²⁴ The Apostle's Fast 30th *Paone*, 1734; Saturday 7th July 2018

In this sacrament of the Eucharist, believers eat the Body of the Lord Jesus Christ and drink His precious Blood. Very simple and very straightforward. This happens under the physical elements of the bread and wine that is offered upon the altar in the sanctuary. Our Lord Jesus Christ instituted this sacrament on Covenant Thursday, just a few hours before His arrest and before His trial, and the day before His crucifixion. Even the timing of it is very critical, and I will touch on that a bit more later.

After the Lord had washed the feet of the disciples, which of course, was a sign of their repentance and their preparedness for this sacrament, He took bread, blessed, broke, and gave it to the disciples and said, "Take, eat, this is My Body." Then He took the cup and gave thanks and gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it all of you, for this is My Blood of the new covenant which is shed for many for the remission of sins" (Matthew 26:27-29). We also read St Paul the Apostle writing to the Corinthians in his first epistle saying, "The Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, 'Take, eat; this is My Body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me.' In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in My Blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.' For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes" (1 Corinthians 11:23-26). St John Chrysostom, in his exegesis of this passage of Scripture says, "Believe that now, the same banquet takes place as when Christ sat at that table, and that this banquet is in no way different."²⁵

²⁵ Talbot W. Chambers, trans., *Saint John Chrysostom, Homilies on 1 Corinthians: Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series*, Vol. 12, ed., Philip Schaff. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1889.)

Well, what is our position then regarding the real presence of the Lord Jesus Christ in this mystery? It is important to remember that our Lord spoke about this sacrament openly to the Jews. If you want these details of what He spoke about always remember John chapter 6. It is a big chapter, and it mainly talks about the bread that came down from Heaven and about eating the flesh of the Son of Man and drinking His blood. When the Lord spoke to the Jews openly about this sacrament, “they quarrelled among themselves, saying ‘How can this Man give us His flesh to eat?’ (John 6:52). Later in the text, “Moreover, many of the disciples protested saying, ‘this is a hard saying; who can understand it?’” (John 6:60). When the Lord Jesus explicitly emphasised His real presence in the sacrament, it was written that many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more. The question of the real presence of the Lord Jesus Christ in the mystery is of utmost importance to our belief. There have been groups that have emerged from time after time, particularly after the reformation and those who said there is no real presence of the Lord Jesus Christ.

A particularly important witness to the early Christian understanding of this sacrament is provided for us in a particular type of work called the catechetical lectures²⁶ that were basically a set of lectures that St Cyril of Jerusalem had written for the Church to teach people who are being prepared for baptism. There are twenty-four lectures of instruction – primarily on the beliefs and practices of the Christian Church, and they were given at some point around the year 350AD to those who are preparing for baptism. An important witness of these lectures shows us that this is the

²⁶ Maxwell Johnson, *Lectures on the Christian sacraments: the Procatechesis and the five Mystagogical catecheses*, (St Vladimir's seminary Press, 2017).

thought that prevailed in all of Jerusalem and in the Christian Church around this point and during his time. But what does St Cyril say in these lectures?

St Cyril regarded the bread and wine as becoming the real body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. He says, "Jesus Christ, by His own will, once changed water into wine at Cana of Galilee. So, why should we not believe that He can change wine into blood? We should, therefore, have full assurance that we are sharing in the body and blood of Christ. For in the type of bread His body is given to you, and in the type of wine, His blood is given to you, so that by partaking in the Body and Blood of Christ you may become one body and one blood with Him."²⁷ Very clear wording and very precise terminology that of the real presence of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, we hear the sayings of other saints. For example, St John of Damascus who answers a question on how this transformation of the bread and wine takes place. He says, "Now you ask how the bread becomes the body of Christ, and the wine and the water become the blood of Christ – I shall tell you! The Holy Spirit comes upon them and achieves things which surpasses every word and thought. Let it be enough for you to understand that this takes place by the Holy Spirit."²⁸ This is why we call it the *mystery of the Eucharist*.

Why then do we believe in the real presence of the Lord Jesus Christ in this mystery? There are three reasons. The first

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ E. W. Watson and L. Pullan, trans., *St John of Damascus, An Exposition of the Orthodox Faith: Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, Vol. 9., ed., Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1899.), exposition 86.

one is biblical, secondly, there are logical reasons, and thirdly, there are also historical reasons.

Firstly, let us look at some of the biblical reasons. We find that the biblical reasons are bound with detail about this mystery. Whenever our Lord Jesus Christ would speak symbolically, (and yet the Jews would understand His words literally), the writer of the Gospel would make some sort of clarification. In other words, if the Lord speaks symbolically, and the Jews would understand Him literally, the writer of the Gospel himself would clarify that matter. Let us have a look at some examples. The Lord said to the Jews, "Destroy this temple..." They thought He was talking about the temple in Jerusalem. He said, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews answered and said to Him, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?" (John 2:19-20). We find St John makes a comment about this saying, "But He was speaking of the temple of His body." He is talking about His death upon the cross and rising after three days. St John clarifies when it is symbolic and literal. I will give you another example. We hear, for example, in the Gospel of St John, that it is written, on the last day, the great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out saying, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water" (John 7:37-38). St John clarifies saying: "But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive..." So, He is not talking about a literal thing here, that out of a heart of a person would flow rivers of living water, but He is talking here in a spiritual matter.

Again, St John clarifies it. One more example, the Lord said, "Then they said to Him, 'Who are You?' And Jesus said to them, 'Just what I have been saying to you from the beginning. I have many things to say and to judge concerning you, but He who sent Me is true; and I speak to the world those things which I heard from Him'" (John 8:25-26). And again, St John clarifies here and says, "They did not understand that He spoke to them of the Father." So, St John always clarifies when there is a mix up between the symbolic and the literal meaning. Now the Lord Jesus Christ said, "the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world.' The Jews therefore quarrelled among themselves saying, "How can this Man give us His flesh to eat?" (John 6:51-52). If the Lord Jesus Christ is speaking symbolically and the Jews misunderstood Him, why did not St John, here, clarify this? Why did he not point their mistake out as He did previously? See, the fact that St John did not do so means that the Lord Jesus Christ was indeed speaking in a literal term here. He was talking about His real body – His real flesh. And the reply of the Lord reinforces the fact that His words are literal. "Most assuredly, I say to you..." most assuredly, in other words He is confirming what He has just said, "unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. For My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed" (John 6:53, 55).

When the Lord Jesus Christ said, "Most assuredly I say to you unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man..." They said to Him, "this is a hard saying; who can understand it?" And the Lord was fully aware that many of His disciples understood these words literally, to the extent that many left the Lord

Jesus Christ. Imagine, the Lord had more than twelve disciples, and St John's Gospel records that many left Him because of this saying. That is why we find in verses 67 to 69, that there is no negotiation on the matter. The Lord, after all the disciples had left Him, turns to the twelve and says to them, "Do you also want to go away?" There is no negotiation on this matter. Simon Peter, of course, answered and he said, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Also, we have come to believe and know that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (John 6:68). Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Understand here, that the term eating flesh occurs symbolically in some places in Holy Scripture, but when it does it refers to slander, or to hate, or to backstabbing. I will give you some examples from the Old Testament, and from the New Testament. For example, Psalm 27 says, "the wicked came against me to eat up my flesh, my enemies and foes, they stumbled and fell." It is talking here in a symbolic way, referring to the enemy's revolt to eat my flesh. Similarly, we read in the book of Micah that it says, "You who hate good and love evil; who strip the skin from my people, and the flesh from their bones; who also eat the flesh of My people, flay their skin from them" (Micah 3:2-3).

Every time the Scripture talks about eating flesh, it refers to it in a slanderous, hateful, or backstabbing manner. Now, if we interpret the Lord's words symbolically, we fall in the worst interpretation because we cannot interpret these words in a symbolic way. The Lord was so clear and so adamant. That is why we find that St Paul commands those to do it in an upright and worthy manner. He says, "he who eats and drinks in an

unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body" (1 Corinthians 11:29). If it is only a symbolic matter, why would St Paul concern himself with talking about discernment when we eat the body of the Lord or not? Why would it be such an important matter? But, to *discern* here, means to perceive and to recognise clearly, or to distinguish. This verse from St Paul particularly proves that the transformation of the bread to the real body of the Lord and the wine into the real blood of the Lord makes a person who eats in faith, and with full trust in the Lord, that they are receiving something so precious. The person who does not eat or drink in a worthily manner, eats and drinks judgement to himself. These are the biblical reasons. And of course, there are many other references; symbols in the Old Testament; very clear references about the disciples when they used to gather to break bread etc.

There are also logical reasons because the words of the Lord Jesus Christ about this sacrament constitute a testimony when He says, "this is My body... this is My blood." Further, the Lord testified that His body is food indeed and that His blood is drink indeed. A testimony must be taken in a literal term, without any figurative or symbolic language, otherwise it cannot be a testimony. It is a covenant, He says, "this cup is a new covenant, whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life" (John 6:54). The words of a covenant are also literal. You cannot, for example, have a contract between you and someone that is symbolic. It is something 'airy-fairy' – something emblematic. But here it is a covenant, and a testimony. Symbols and allegories must have a type of resemblance – they resemble something else that is real. If the

Lord here is speaking in figurative language, then it should be pointing to something else, but here they do not point to something else, they point to His own being, to His own person, His own flesh, and His own blood.

We also find that St Paul talks about the severe punishments that reach unto death for those who receive in an unworthy manner. If this were a symbolic matter, why would St Paul talk in such harsh words? From doing something symbolically, why would I become ill and die if I receive in an unworthy manner? Again, it does not make any logical sense.

Furthermore, we have historical reasons. Despite all our disagreements between different denominations, all the apostolic churches universally, agreed about the real presence of the Lord in the sacrament of the Eucharist. All Eastern and Western churches have agreed – even Martin Luther himself, even though we may have so many things against his teachings and how he broke off from the Catholic Church, but yet he would not dare to deny the presence of the Lord in the Eucharist.

We find the incredible amount of work available from the early church fathers that talk about this. Let me quickly go through some of them with you, because some of them are quite beautiful, clear, and to the point. For example, St Cyril of Jerusalem says, “what seems bread is not bread, though bread by taste but the body of Christ. What seems wine is not wine, though by taste you will have to say so, but the blood of Christ.”²⁹ St Athanasius says, “As long as the invocation and

²⁹ Maxwell Johnson, *Lectures on the Christian sacraments: the Procatechesis and the five Mystagogical catecheses*, (St Vladimir's seminary Press, 1951), Mystagogic Catechesis 4.

prayers have not begun, there is only bread and wine. But after the great and wonderful prayers have been pronounced, when the bread becomes the body of the Lord Jesus Christ and the wine becomes His blood, let us come to the celebration of the mysteries.”³⁰ St Ambrose of Milan says, “The sacrament you receive is made what it is by the word of Christ. If the word of Elijah had such power to bring down fire from heaven, shall not the word of Christ have power to change the nature of the elements?”³¹ St John of Damascus, who we quoted before, he says, “If I am asked how the bread is changed into the body of Christ, my answer is the Holy Ghost overshadows the priest, and operates in the same manner in the elements which He effected in the womb of the Virgin Mary.”³² As in the incarnation, in the womb of the Virgin Mary, also the Holy Spirit, through the instrument of God, the priest, that these elements are changed. Look again at this beautiful quote by St Cyril of Jerusalem who says, “Consider then the bread and wine, not as bare elements, they are according to the Lord’s declaration the body and blood of Christ for even though sense suggests to you, let faith assure you. Judge not the matter from

³⁰ This is actually found in a fragment of a homily of St Athanasius to the neophytes. Athanasius writes to the newly baptised in their initiation to the sacraments. See, Athanasius, *Fragmentum apud Eutylichem*, in *M.J. Rouët de Journal, Enchiridion Patristicum*, 25th ed., no. 802 (Barcelona/Rome: Herder, 1981), 294.

³¹ Ambrose, *De Mysteriis* 9.52-54, trans., Roy Deferraro, in *Saint Ambrose: Theological and Dogmatic Words* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1963, FC 44), 25 – 26.

³² E. W. Watson and L. Pullan, trans., St John of Damascus, *An Exposition of the Orthodox Faith: Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Vol. 9.*, ed., Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1899.), exposition 4.13.

the taste but be fully assured by faith without misgiving.”³³ Thus, we find very clear biblical, logical, and historical reasons of the real presence of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Here are some of the benefits of this sacrament without going into too much detail. The first important point is that it is abiding in God. He said, “He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in Me and I in him” (John 6:56). If we sometimes think to ourselves and say why am I not bearing fruit in my spiritual life? Maybe it is because I am not abiding in Christ through this mystery, in a worthily and proper preparation for it. We, therefore, bear the fruits of the Spirit if we only abide in Christ. Remember, He said, “He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit. For without Me you can do nothing” (John 15:5).

It is also spiritual bread because the Lord said to us, “For the bread of God is He who comes down from Heaven and gives life to the world. I am the bread of life...” the Lord Jesus Christ said, “If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world” (John 6:51). He who eats of this bread will live forever. The bread of life gives us the spiritual food that we need. Just like I need physical food on a daily basis and without it I cannot survive or even resist anything that might come and affect my immune system, also without the spiritual food, I cannot resist the temptation and the wiles of Satan. It grants me growth and maintenance of our spiritual life. “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink

³³ Maxwell Johnson, *Lectures on the Christian sacraments: the Procatechesis and the five Mystagogical catecheses*, (St Vladimirs' seminary Press, 1951), Mystagogic Catechesis 4.

His blood, you have no life in you” (John 6:53). We would be lifeless without the body and blood of Christ. In the liturgy, we say, “given for us for salvation, remission of sins and eternal life to those who partake of Him.” Look at this threefold blessing - salvation, remission of sins, and everlasting life. Of course, this point about remission of sins is that without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sin. Without the shedding of the blood of the Son of Man upon the cross there is no forgiveness for our sins. Without the extension of this sacrifice on the cross that we have upon the altar, although a bloodless sacrifice, there is no remission of sins.

The Eucharist is also a personal covenant you have between God and yourself. We pray in the liturgy, “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.” This is a personal covenant between the Lord Jesus Christ and me. Remember that each time you partake of Holy Communion, you are entering and renewing this covenant on a personal level.

There is also a hidden mystery here in communion. You know, it unites all the believers together. Look at what St Paul says about this great mystery. He says, “or we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread” (1 Corinthians 10:17). What a great mystery? It unites all believers worldwide, not just here in our church. Unification of believers. St Cyprian of Carthage says, “In this very sacrament our people are shown to be made one, just as many grains collected and ground and mixed together become one bread, so in Christ, who is Heavenly bread, we may know

that there is one body with which our number is joined and united.”³⁴

This Holy Bread that we see upon the altar, that we all partake from, is nothing more but grains that are collected, ground, and made into bread, then through the prayers it is changed into the body of Christ. This is also symbolic of all our unity together, in that one body, and that is of Christ. You see, it is very important that we understand the dogma and the faith of the church.

Q&A: *Are there any real-life miracles about the Eucharist?*

I wanted to tell you about a real-life miracle, but I think you will quickly pick up of where I am coming from. It happened two thousand years ago and continues to happen. This is a real-life miracle! This is what the whole church gathers around for. Two thousand years ago there was this Man called Jesus Christ, who was perceived to be a prophet, a person who worked miracles, who actually sat with His twelve disciples and gave them this bread and said, “Take eat, this is my body.” Is this not a miracle in itself? It is a real-life miracle; it is not a story – it really happened. And this real-life miracle story is continuing day to day in our churches everywhere. Do not ever underestimate the power of this mystery, do not ever be fooled by people who come and say to you, “this is only a commemoration or a memory of the Lord Jesus Christ.” Do

³⁴ Robert Ernest Wallis, trans., *St Cyprian of Carthage, Epistles: Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 5, eds., Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1886.), epistle 13.

not ever be fooled by other even Christian denominations who might say, "There is no real presence of the Lord Jesus Christ in this mystery." No! This is our faith, that yes, I am receiving what it looks like to be bread, and what looks like to be wine, but I am receiving the body and the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Q&A: *What can I do to benefit more from the Eucharist, and what are some things that I can keep in my mind to make me revere what I am receiving?*

Very important question. What can I do to benefit more from this sacrament and how can I revere it more rather than just make it a habit that I might go through on a weekly basis? Well, we all know that preparation for the Holy sacrament of the Eucharist is important. Believe it or not, the more I prepare for it, the more that I will take from it. Just to do a quick analogy: how many disciples had Holy Communion from the Lord Himself? We hear about eleven disciples. How many do we find at the cross? One disciple. It is a scary thing when you think about it. Eleven partook of His body and His blood and only one disciple was there at the foot of the cross, who was St John the Beloved. How many thousands of people might have Holy Communion, but how many do benefit? So always remind yourself and say, "The more I prepare for it, the better off I am going to be."

Prepare by faith. Living the sacrament of repentance and confession. Prepare for it by being in the presence of the Lord

Jesus Christ throughout the whole week and then you will come towards the day of Holy Communion, and you will feel that this is an icing on the cake.

Imagine that this beautiful fellowship that you have with the Lord throughout the whole week, you will be too eager and cannot wait to partake of the body and blood of the Lord. Prepare by being present in the church. The church in her wisdom has set all these preceding prayers and rituals to prepare us for the Eucharist. Starting from Saturday evening, where we have praises for vespers, the Agpeya prayers, the midnight praise, the morning raising of incense, the morning doxology and we have the psalms – all this is leading to what? For Holy Communion. After you have prepared all this, and when you come to partake of the Holy Communion say, “Lord, I am unworthy but because of my need of this, Lord that you allow me to partake, and to be one with You.”

It is not because now I have become worthy, no. No matter how much you prepare there is no way that you can become worthy. Who is worthy to be able to eat and drink of the flesh and the blood of the Son of God? But come to communion and say, “Lord it is not because of my worthiness. No, it is because of my need that I come and present myself after all this preparation.” So, it is not just a habit that we go through, do not just go through the motions, but prepare yourself for it.

"Another of the old men questioned Amma Theodora saying, 'At the resurrection of the dead, how shall we rise?' She said, 'We have Christ our God who died for us and arose as a pledge, an example, and as a first-fruit.'"

*Amma Theodora*³⁵

7

My Life in the Resurrection³⁶

ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ ΑΝΕΣΤΗ

What is the significance of the feast of the Resurrection? Why do we celebrate it with such elaborate festivity? I do not mean with the indulgence of food, but I mean in terms of the Church rituals and practices. Why do we sing in joyful tunes for fifty days to commemorate this beautiful event that happened some two-thousand years ago? I came up with a few things about the essence of the Resurrection.

First and foremost, the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ means that you and I are justified before God. What do

³⁵ John Wortley, *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2014), 130.

³⁶ A youth topic delivered at St Mary's Coptic Orthodox Church, Kensington, Melbourne. The Holy 50 Days of the Resurrection. 1st Week of Pentecost; Paramoute 6 1734; Saturday 14th April 2018.

we mean by that? The Lord was delivered up to the Cross for our sin, for my sin, and He was also raised for our justification. Justification here means to make something right. As you know, our sins, or the sins of humanity, the sins of each one of us separated us from God. Someone had to step in to correct that. We cannot have the relationship with God that He intended unless someone corrected that state. That is why our Lord Jesus Christ died on the cross. That way, we could be justified before God.

The resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ confirms that God accepted this sacrifice upon the cross through His Only Begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. That sacrifice for our sins was accepted by God the Father in order to give us the relationship again between us and Him. It has a personal meaning. I am justified before God because of this beautiful sacrifice that God has offered on my behalf because of my sins on the cross, and because of His Resurrection.

The resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ shows us that He was able to defeat Satan. And this as an important message for you and me on a very personal level. Just as He was able to conquer Satan, He gives us the power to be able to conquer Satan. As you know, death was the enemy of mankind and it was the punishment for each person's individual sin, as we are told in the book of Romans, "the wage of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). Because of our sin, this punishment of death reigned over each one of us. Each one of us had this label of death put on them because of their sin. And, you know what? The mortality rate is, and always will be one hundred percent. No matter what effort, no matter what technology, no matter

what medical advancements, no matter what power or riches, no one can escape the clutches of death. However, when Christ arose from the dead, it meant that sin no longer had power on Him. Sin no longer has power or a threat over you and me as well because Christ triumphed over sin. Death is no longer an enemy. We hear about how people feared death in the olden days, but now people flock towards their martyrdom because they know that their death is a start to their eternity.

Death no longer has become an enemy to us because of what Christ did. That is why we do not fear death anymore, but we know that it is just a transferring of one life to another – a life that will be eternal. It is no wonder that St Paul quotes this beautiful saying, when he says, “O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?” (1 Corinthians 15:55). It does not have any power over us anymore. The Lord Jesus Christ’s resurrection means that the Lord defeated death for your sake and for my sake!

The resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ means that all believers are united with Him, and I am not talking here in theory, but I am talking in actual reality. When you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, you are united to Him in faith, and this union with Christ means that when God the Father looks to each one of us, He can see the righteousness of Christ in us. What do I mean by that? He sees what Christ did for you. He sacrificed His Only Begotten Son for your sake and for my sake. Every time the Lord looks at us, He does not necessarily look at our unrighteousness, but He looks at the righteousness of Christ in us. That is an important thing because it means we are united to the Lord eternally through faith and through His

resurrection. It means that if we have died with Him that we will also live with Him. Just as He was sacrificed for our sake, we sacrifice our life for His sake as well, and then that union becomes effective through the resurrection of Christ.

What would it mean if Christ had only died and not rose again? It means nothing. But, because He rose again, He sealed this union between us and Him. Let me give you a bit of an example to help. When a couple are united in marriage, the belongings of one of the spouses becomes the belongings of both after marriage. It is no longer my things and your things; they are both there together. It is the same with the Lord Jesus Christ, after His resurrection, what is His is ours and what is ours is His. To that extent, when you think about it, He says that to each one of us who overcomes, that He will grant us to sit upon His throne. To sit upon Your throne Lord, You are the one who was victorious over sin, and You are the one who suffered this humiliation and this crucifixion, the most gruesome acts of torture ever thought of by mankind. And He says, "Yes, because I overcame, you also, overcome and you will sit with Me on My throne." Some people contemplate and say, "I wish I would only just be able to enter into Heaven, or to be in the back rows of the Heavenly pews, or even just to be at the footstool of the Lord Jesus Christ." But the Lord says, "Your place is on the throne with Me."

Further, the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ confirms to us the truth of Scripture. How many times do we hear that people challenge Scripture, and they say that it is symbolic or not true, it is only just to give us an indication to teach us a moral lesson. You will always notice that the media,

particularly at times of Christmas and Easter, will go on to attack Scriptures. They say, "Oh, look we found the tomb of Christ in India, or we found manuscripts that say that He actually is just a normal human being and no more than that." There is always an attack on Scripture. But the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ confirms the truth of Scripture. If we look at some of the passages of the Old Testament, you will be amazed to think that these people were living the New Testament and seeing it from afar, with so much clarity. Let me read for you, for example, a passage from the book of Isaiah. He is some seven-hundred years before Christ. He says, "Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise Him; He has put Him to grief. When You make His soul an offering for sin, He shall see His seed, He shall prolong His days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in His hand. He shall see the labour of His soul and be satisfied. By His knowledge, My righteous Servant shall justify many, for He shall bear their iniquities. Therefore, I will divide Him a portion with the great, and He shall divide the spoil with the strong, because He poured out His soul unto death, and He was numbered with the transgressors, and He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors" (Isaiah 53:10-12). He is explaining here, the scene of the crucifixion in such detail. Or, have a look at somebody like David the Prophet when he says in his psalms, "For You will not leave my soul in Sheol, nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption. You will show me the path of life; in Your presence is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore" (Psalm 16:10-11). These are just two of the many, many prophecies that were fulfilled by the resurrection of our Lord. The resurrection of the Lord proves to us that what we have in our hands, in terms

of Scripture, is truthful. Do not ever be dismayed, surprised, or even moved when somebody comes and says to you, “prove to me that what you have in your hand is actually real.” If they say that to you, say to them, “prove to me that your name is what you think it is,” and if they cannot prove that, well then, they have fallen short. But of course, there are many proofs to show that our bible is reliable and that its sources go back to old manuscripts and to old documents to show that it is truth.

The resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ proves not just that what is written is true, but it verifies that the message of the Gospel is also true. The fact is that if Christ is alive today because of His resurrection, means that Christ is also able to save today as well; He can save sinful people like myself. This was a major argument that St Paul wrote to the Corinthians, and he defends the truth of the resurrection by explaining that the whole Christian Gospel, the whole message of the Gospel depends on this very central theme of the resurrection. He says, “And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty, and your faith is also empty” (1 Corinthians 15:14). He further mentions, “And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable” (1 Corinthians 15:17-19). If the resurrection did not happen then all our faith is futile, it is empty, and has no meaning. If you go back and read this chapter in first Corinthians chapter fifteen, you will find some intricate analogies that St Paul makes about what it means to be resurrected in the Lord Jesus Christ. He explains that the resurrection is not only a fundamental part of the Gospel, but

he adds that it is *the glue*, or he likens it to glue that holds every part of the Gospel together. Without the resurrection, Christian belief is vain, it would not exist, and we are without hope.

The resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ also proves that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. St Paul, when he talks about the Lord Jesus Christ, says, “who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, and declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead” (Romans 1:3-4). If the Lord Jesus Christ had died and remained dead, like many millions before Him or many millions after Him, then what good would that be? Before the Lord’s death, anyone who died, would be captured by Satan, and locked into Hades. That is why we have this beautiful icon of the resurrection where the Lord Jesus Christ is descending into Hades and rescuing Adam and Eve. Satan tried to do this with the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. When He died the cross, Satan thought it would be another soul that I will capture and lock up into Hades. Rather than capture Christ, what did Christ do? He captured Satan and locked him up and put him into the lower parts of the earth and made the captives free. That is, made all those who lived a holy and righteous life on the hope of the resurrection, raising them up out of Hades and transferred them to paradise. That is why Christ’s resurrection proves that He is someone of a unique status. He is the Son of God; He is not just another human being. Again, it is a personal meaning to you and me that He, being the Son of God, is special to me. He is my Saviour; He is God incarnate. He is special.

The resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ means that you and I are granted the Holy Spirit to abide in us, and for you and me to become a temple of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is poured out into the heart of the believer because of Christ's resurrection and ascension. After Christ died, rose from the dead and ascended, He sent His Holy Spirit to continue the work on earth. This means that Christ's earthly mission continues but through you and me. Therefore, you and I have a duty to continue to build the kingdom of God on earth on His behalf. You, being the temple of the Holy Spirit who dwells in you, have a duty then to carry on Christ's work. You have become like little Christs. You have the same work to fulfil that Christ also did and started while He was here on earth, and His Holy Spirit aids you and abides in you in order to make you to be able to do that. That is why the Holy Spirit helps the people of God. He helps the people of God by strengthening us, by convicting us when we do wrong; talking to our conscience and our hearts by guiding us into the life that God desires out of each one of us. We hear in the book of Acts, "Therefore being exalted to the right hand of God and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He poured out this which you now see and hear" (Acts 2:33). This is what St Peter told the people when the Holy Spirit came upon them. It is interesting to see here that he says this Holy Spirit is now whom you "see and hear." You see, the Holy Spirit is one of the Trinity. So, we refer to the Holy Spirit as "He." Not just the power of God, no, He is Lord and God as well. So again, the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ means that He has poured His Holy Spirit into each of the believer's heart to carry on this work that He started here on earth.

The resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ also gives you and I an amazing living hope. Without the resurrection, we have no hope. Being forgiven for our sins makes us Christians have a tremendous hope – there is no greater news than that. Imagine that every time you commit a sin, you have this door of repentance that leads to forgiveness. I love this beautiful sticker that they sometimes put on the back of cars that say, “Christians are not perfect, just forgiven.” Christians are not perfect, no, of course not. Anyone who uses this argument and says, “Why should I go to church? Look at the people of the church,” as if they themselves are living a life of righteousness. Say, “I am not living a life of righteousness just because I am at church, I am at church because I need this road to righteousness. I need to discover this road and live this road every moment of my life. But yes, I know I am forgiven, and there is no better news than that.” Listen to what St Peter says in his first Epistle, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you” (1 Peter 1:3-4). What a great hope we have on a personal level from the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ has a very significant and personal meaning in that we will also be raised like Him. Christ is described as the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. He has put a deposit on our resurrection by His very own resurrection. It means that His resurrection is a precursor of the resurrection of all believers. That is why

again, St Paul writes to the Corinthians a beautiful chapter about the resurrection and says, "For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead" (1 Corinthians 15:21). What is he talking about here? "By man came death" who is this man? Adam. "By man" – Adam sinning – death came into the world. But also, "by Man," capital "M" is the Lord Jesus Christ who became the resurrection of the dead. He continues to say, "For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive" (1 Corinthians 15:22). You see? The resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ means that we will be raised with Him as well. It is important that as Christians, we enjoy this resurrected life of the Lord Jesus Christ just as He also resurrected with a glorified body and was raised in power. We also will be raised in the same way. Yes, we will be raised in a glorious body, a body that is perfect in every aspect. We may suffer nowadays in our life here on earth, we might suffer pain and illness and other ailments, but in the life to come, we will not suffer but enjoy perfect and glorious bodies.

The resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ also means that Christ will judge the world in righteousness. The book of Acts tells us, "these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead" (Acts 17:30-31) – that is the Lord Jesus Christ. Everyone will go through that judgement; the whole world will one day be judged for the things they have done and will be held accountable before God. Believers and unbelievers. He

will judge the world in righteousness. The sign that God has given confirms that the righteous judgement is because of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ from the dead. Believing in what Jesus has done gives us the benefits of the resurrection, but living the resurrection allows us to live the results of that as well. That is why He said, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die" (John 11:25-26).

What does all this mean to you and me? It really means, I think, one thing, and one thing only. That there is an urgent need here for a personal response to Christ's resurrection. What is my response to Christ's resurrection? And I am not talking here theoretically. The reason I ask that question is because I am reminded of St Matthew's account of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are told about the soldiers who guarded the grave which our Lord Jesus Christ was buried and that they were terrified at the things which accompanied the resurrection of the Lord. They were even terrified at the sight of the angel who came to roll away the stone. It says, "And behold, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone from the door and sat on it. His countenance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow. And the guards shook for fear of him and became like dead men" (Matthew 28:2-4). This is what they saw at the resurrection. Do you know what is so sad about it? Despite all this, we do not see any evidence in Scripture that these men came to faith in Christ. They saw and yet did not believe. They

heard, they witnessed yet did not believe. Instead, they were actually paid off, they were paid off and became a part of a conspiracy to cover up the resurrection. They were paid “hush money”, to keep quiet. Literally, it means an eternal life or an eternal death because the resurrection is not simply a fact to be believed or rejected – it is far more than that. It is a fact to which our personal response will determine our eternity forever. It will determine our destiny forever. It is whether I accept it, believe it, and live in it, and that will make a world of a difference where I live eternally. Literally, a world of a difference.

The resurrection of our Lord assures all men whether they are saved or unsaved of being resurrected from the grave. Everybody will resurrect from the grave, but in no way does the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ assure all men or all humans of experiencing the same blessings when they are resurrected. I will conclude, just on this point, with two verses. One from the Old Testament to show that this is a belief that always existed, and from words of our Lord Jesus Christ in the New Testament. Look at what the book of Daniel says, “And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting contempt” (Daniel 12:2). Everybody will rise from the dead, but where they go after that is what makes a world of difference. Also, the Lord says in the Gospel of St John, “Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation” (John 5:28-29).

There will be a resurrection, but where do you go after this resurrection? That is why we must have an urgent response to Christ's resurrection – a personal and urgent response. What is my position with regards to the resurrection? Do I believe in this? Do I live in this? Do I enjoy the fruit of this resurrection? Or is it just a theory that I have heard about, celebrate, and go through the motion. It makes a world of a difference – it is either eternal life or eternal death.

May the resurrected Lord grant us that we live the Holy Resurrection every moment of our life. Remember that your repentance and your arising from sin is a type of resurrection that is ongoing. You rise from the sin to become a new creation and to become a new being.

"A brother asked Abba Poemen, 'If a person be caught up in some fault, then refrain from it, is he pardoned by God?' The old man said to him, 'Will not God, who has commanded men to act thus, do as much himself and even more? For God commanded Peter to forgive till seventy times seven.' (Matt. 18.22)"

*Abba Poemen*³⁷

8

Spirituality in Practice³⁸

The book of Genesis tells us that man was created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27), and it is because of this tendency that we have toward God that we all seek something in our lives. We find that there is a void, not knowing what this void is. When man was created in the image of God, he was also created in the likeness of God. And, when we talk about the likeness of God, we are referring to the likeness of His goodness. He was created in the likeness of the goodness of God, and of course, God is the author of all goodness.

³⁷ John Wortley, *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2014), 241.

³⁸ The following 8 sub-chapters are series of talks given by Fr Macarius based on the book: Fr Athanasius Iskander, *Practical Spirituality according to the Desert Fathers*, (Australia: St. Shenouda Monastery Press, 2008).

However, when our forefathers, Adam and Eve fell into sin, human nature also became fallen. Sin was introduced into human nature. Human nature now has become corrupted. The significant change in man was because of the sin that entered the life of man. This created being, that was created in the image and likeness of God to seek the affinity of God, has now become tarnished. It is almost as if there is a dual will that existed within man, a higher will that seeks God and wants to live with God, and a lower will that seeks to self-gratify the person himself or herself. This is where that fight starts to become evident in the life of man.

Sin also corrupted the human mind and led to another duality, and that was a duality of the law. In other words, we now have the law of sin – because sin has reigned in the human nature – but also, we have the natural law of goodness that man was created upon. And again, that gives rise to that conflict. I suppose, to sum it up, there is no better words than that of St Paul who talks about it in an almost frustrated manner by describing very well saying, “For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice” (Romans 7:18-19). He is saying, “I want to do good, but it seems to be getting further and further away from me, and it is the very thing that I do not want to do, that I end up doing.” It is a struggle. A frustrating struggle that St Paul puts into words.

Now, when our Lord Jesus Christ was incarnate, and He took the form of our flesh, He took our weakness to raise our

weakness to a different level by elevating the fallen human nature to its original state, the state of the image and likeness of God. Therefore, when He died upon the cross, He put an end to any dominance of sin in our life. Our Lord gave us a chance to fight back and to regain our original nature, and this was achieved in baptism. Having been renewed in baptism, and sanctified by the Holy Spirit, the Lord encouraged us to seek perfection once more. Even the perfection of the Father. Therefore, the Lord tells us, "Therefore you shall be perfect, just like your Father in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). Now comes the practical side of things.

The Bible tells us what it is that we need to do, which is perfection and eternal life. It does not actually tell us how to reach this perfection. It leaves this process for each one of us. Which is why we are commanded in scripture by St Paul, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12). So how does one work out his or her own salvation? It is a very difficult thing.

In the early years of the Church, Christians sought to work out their own salvation by offering the ultimate sacrifice – that was martyrdom. When they offer their own life for the sake of Christ, this was their way of attaining salvation. When the era of persecution had ended, and the Emperor Constantine the Great published his edict in the year 313 AD to tolerate Christianity, Christians had to find another way to work out their own salvation. Martyrdom was not as available as was in the earlier years. Many have sought out other ways to work out their salvation. Some sought the wilderness to work out their salvation. These athletes of Christ as we call them, went into

the wilderness, and wrestled with demons in order to attain Christian perfection. Soon enough, monasticism replaced martyrdom as the ideal way of reaching Christian perfection. In doing so, these great athletes of Christ have done us a great favour. They have left us a huge body of writings about how to attain Christian perfection. The only problem was that they had certain conditions that they had put for each person to reach that perfection. When you read in the spirituality of the desert fathers, you find that there are two important characteristics of spirituality. The first one is that they insisted on discipleship.

Anyone who sought after the art of spirituality had to attach himself to what they call a 'master' or an 'abba' who is an elder. This was not an easy matter because these masters or elders were very stringent and had difficult qualifying exams for the candidates. For example, we hear about the great Abba Pachomius, that he was left begging, to be ignored outside the cell of Abba Palamon for three days and three nights before he was accepted to be a novice.³⁹ Imagine, three days, left at the door of Abba Palamon, three days and three nights begging to be accepted just as a novice or an apprentice. So, that is the first thing, they sought discipleship.

Secondly, and just as important a rule, they wanted to make void the persons reliance on himself or herself. You cannot rely on yourself or your own judgment. The apprentice had to offer complete and blind obedience to the abba who assumed all the

³⁹ For the complete life of Abba Pachomius, see Armand Veilleux, ed., *Pachomian Koinonia: The life of Saint Pachomius and his disciples*. Vol. 1, (Cistercian Publications, 1980).

responsibility for training the novice. That might seem very absurd to us nowadays. We all know, for example, about the master who gave his disciple the dry stick and said, “plant it, and water it.”⁴⁰ Out of obedience, of course, the novice did that. The obedience was not in vain for after three years, the stick started to bud and to bring fruit. So that had to have complete blind obedience. How does all this relate to us in the 21st century, which is very different to those days?

Maybe the morals are different, although that is debatable, but at least the challenges are different that we live in our day and in our world. The world is changing for the worse daily. We need to borrow these methods that the early church and desert fathers had and apply them to our struggles that we face today. This is what we are trying to achieve, and just as warning, some of these exercises are not achievable. The desert fathers took tens of years to achieve some of these virtues. We might take hundreds of years to achieve these virtues. I am not trying to put anyone down or make you lose hope, but I am saying this as a reality check to ourselves. That is why it is important, that any of these virtues that you want to practice must be under the guidance of your confession father.

⁴⁰ This is a reference to Abba John Colobos (or the Dwarf) who was given a piece of dry wood by Abba Pambo. The account states: “They used to say of Abba John Colobos that, having withdrawn from the world to be with an elder from Thebes at Scete, he was living in the desert. His abba took some dry wood, planted it and said to him: ‘Irrigate it every day with a bottle of water until it bears fruit.’ Water was a long way from them, so one had to go in the evening and return at dawn. After three years [the dry wood] became alive and bore fruit. The elder took its fruit and brought it to the church, saying to the brothers: ‘Take and eat some fruit of obedience.’” See, John Wortley, *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, (St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2014), 131.

We will be discussing together, the discipline of the mind, the discipline of the will, the discipline of the senses, the discipline of the memory and imagination. We will look at presumptuous sins or hidden sins. We will even look at how to pursue virtues by learning about three virtues to conclude with, which are meekness, chastity, and discernment.

The first part is the discipline of the mind. We will look at these two points:

1. Protect your mind by emptying harmful and unprofitable knowledge.
2. Plant in and fill your mind spiritual knowledge.

The early fathers tell us that if you want to pursue Christian perfection, we must protect our mind from the information that is unprofitable for our souls. In this day and age, there is a lot! We live in an age where there is so much information the world is offering it to us like never before. Most of the time, it leads to the pollution of our mind with useless information. Today, we even have 'information junkies' who just want to seek information, not just to improve their efficiency or their life, but information for the sake of having that information – just for knowing that information. For example, everybody wants to tell others where they are, where they have checked in, what they are eating, and even as soon as you open your Facebook or any social media, it will assist you by asking, "what is on your mind, Macarius?" It prompts you to share your inner thoughts and personal information with others. That is reality - is it not? That is what we live in.

How many times have you seen your friends share which restaurant they are in? They take a picture of their food and post it, so you know what they are eating. We know almost intricate details about people. We are living in an information age. But I want you to compare this with what St Paul says, "For I am determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (1 Corinth 2:2). How does that compare with what we are going through? Jesus is all St Paul wants to know. The wise man of old says to us, "For in much wisdom, is much grief. And he who increases knowledge, increases sorrow" (Ecclesiastes 1:18).

Unprofitable Knowledge

The first example I want to share with you of unprofitable knowledge is *excessive watching of news*. It is good of course to know what is happening in the world around us. However, to be obsessed and know the intricate details of all matters or most matters happening everywhere around the world will affect our pursuit for Christian perfection – believe it or not. TV and radio stations now, knowing the insatiable appetite that people have for news, have created 24/7 news channels because they realise that this is what people want to know. If you want to take a little exercise with you during the fasts of Wednesdays and Fridays, avoid listening to any radio. Avoid listening to the news and reading magazines. You know what will happen? It will free the mind, and you will find that you will function much better when you do away with these things, even if it is for a short period of time. Some people practice this in every fast the church observes. For example, in Great Lent, people might go for the whole fifty-five days without watching TV, or watching the news, or even reading any newspapers or magazines.

There is a beautiful story about a monk who was sitting and chatting with other monks. After they had finished chatting, he went to his cell and another monk saw him going around his cell several times, just revolving around his cell. He thought this was a strange thing. *Why is this monk going around his cell multiple times and not entering it?* So, he went to that monk and asked what he was doing. The monk replied to him, “I am getting rid of all the worldly talk we were talking about because I do not want to bring it into my cell with me.”⁴¹ See, when we are occupied with all these things around us, it takes away from our pursuit of Christian perfection. It takes away from the good we can store and take on in our lives.

There is also another example of unprofitable knowledge, and that is idle curiosity. It is seeking information. Seeking information about many things for the sole purpose of being knowledgeable. How can this hurt me? The church fathers said that this is a form of gluttony - a gluttony for knowledge. This can lead to several problems. It can lead to the person thinking of himself or herself more highly than others because they think they know more which will lead to pride and arrogance. It could lead the person to become very talkative because they want to parade all the knowledge that they have in front of others. Theophan the Recluse tells us that ultimately our mind

⁴¹ This is a reference to Abba John Colobos (the dwarf). “They used to say of Abba John that, coming into the church of skete, he heard the disputation of some brothers. He returned to his cell, walked around it three times, then went in. Some brothers who saw him were at a loss as to why he did this. They came to ask him, and he said to them: ‘My ears were full of disputation to cleanse them and so entered my cell in *hesychia* of mind.’” John Colobos 25, John Wortley, *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, (St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2014), 137.

becomes an idol that we worship.⁴² Of course, idol worship is forbidden. We become opiniated, refusing to consult or accept advice from others because I know that I am better than others. All this leads to the pride of mind that makes us depend on ourselves even in some spiritual matters which is quite dangerous. I run by my own understanding, whereas, scripture says, “lean not on your own understanding” (Prov. 3:5). This approach could be very dangerous for the person wanting to reach Christian perfection.

If you want to pursue Christian perfection, we need to wean our minds from this addiction to knowledge. St Paul says, “If anyone among you seems to be wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God” (1 Corinth 3:18-19). What does this mean? Spiritual wisdom and worldly wisdom do not go hand in hand. People who seek after the wisdom of this world in an excessive way, can end up being atheists because they are puffed up by their own knowledge or by their own conceited minds, and they deny God who created that mind. Here, St Paul warns his disciple Timothy saying, “O Timothy! Guard what was committed to your trust, avoiding the profane and idle babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge— by professing it some have strayed concerning the faith” (1 Timothy 6: 20-21). Some think they have, but this earthly knowledge has taken them from their faith. We also read from David the Prophet, “I was so foolish and ignorant; I was like a beast before You. Nevertheless, I am continually with You; You hold me by my right hand. You will guide me

⁴² This statement summarises “The Sinners Condition” in St Theophan the Recluse, *The Path to Salvation: A Manual of Spiritual Transformation*, (Arizona: St Paisius Monastery, 2006), 95-100.

with Your counsel, and afterward receive me to glory” (Psalms 73:22-24). The person who becomes foolish in front of God is the person who becomes wise. If I declare my foolishness before God, He will hold me by my right hand and guide me with His counsel, and afterward, receive me into His glory. It is only when I admit before God that I am foolish, that is when His wisdom starts to take effect in my life. If I admit that I am wise, God says, “Well, stay with your own wisdom. Let us see where your own wisdom will lead you.” Again, I tell you, lean not on your own understanding.

I suppose people who have a very strong curiosity, that just want to ‘know’, want to have a look, to make sure that they are up to date with all this knowledge and all this information, become a little like Lot’s wife, whose curiosity led her to turn around when they were escaping Sodom and Gomorrah. Even though they were warned, “do not turn around, do not look at the city, flee for your life” (Genesis 19:17), yet curiosity led Lot’s wife to perish. This is what we are told by the Lord Himself in the Gospel of St Luke where he talks about the end of times. He says, “In that day, he who is on the housetop, and his goods are in the house, let him not come down to take them away. And likewise, the one who is in the field, let him not turn back. Remember Lot’s wife” (Luke 17:31-32). At the end of time, when the anti-Christ comes, do not be curious to know what wonders he is working. Do not look at that. Remain focused on your Christ, otherwise you become like Lot’s wife.

Harmful Knowledge

We have spoken about unprofitable knowledge, but what about harmful knowledge? There is plenty of that around as

well. The obsession with knowing things about other people or what the Bible calls, a person who is a 'busybody', is very harmful. We are told this by our teacher St Peter. Notice how he compares a busybody with some other things. He says, "But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people's matters" (1 Peter 4:15-16). He is classifying the busybody with a murderer, a thief, and an evildoer. That is scary. Knowing the affairs of others becomes the root of all gossip, and the devil will convince us that we want to know these things because we want to help this person. You know, I do not need to know the intricate matters of a person to help them. For example, I can pray for a person who is sick without asking what their illness is or prying into their private illness that they are going through. I can congratulate a person who has just been employed without asking them what their salary is. I can help somebody move into their new home without asking them how much they paid for it. I do not need to get into intricate details with people in order to help them.

It is an issue and problem with young people these days. They are obsessed by the secrets of their friends: "If you tell me your secret, I will tell you mine. If you do not tell me your secret, I will not tell you mine. And, if you do not tell me yours, I am no longer your friend - obviously, you do not trust me." We hear this too many times and it is sad. Some people even complain and say, "You know, Abuna, sometimes I actually have to lie to people in order not to tell them my personal affairs." The response and answer to that is simple. Do not lie. Simply tell people it is personal, apologise and do not answer. If they get upset and do not want to talk to you anymore, then

do not worry because true friends are supposed to respect the privacy of their friends rather than insist on knowing their secrets. It is that simple. Now, let us go onto something a little more positive, that is, spiritual knowledge.

Spiritual Knowledge

To understand spiritual knowledge, we must go back to scripture and what the Bible tells us. We all read our Bible. We all memorise verses. We are all very good at that. The Bible is at our fingertips with the technology that we have. However, we sometimes neglect to implant these spiritual principles that these verses contain in our minds. Have a look at what the book of Deuteronomy says when God is speaking to His people: "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. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates" (Deuteronomy 6:6-9). We must assimilate all the words that are given to us in scripture and imprint them in our minds and in our hearts until they become part of our life and thought processes. To the extent where we no longer need to think of what the commandment of God is, but we just do it. It is a part of me, and I am a part of it. For example, the Bible tells us, "Woe to you when all men speak well of you" (Luke 6:26) and again, "Blessed are you when men hate you, and when they exclude you, and revile you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of Man's sake. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy! For indeed your reward is great in heaven" (Luke 26:22-23). According to these verses, to be

despised is more of a blessing than to be praised. Is that not what scripture is saying? Do we do that? Is this imprinted and implanted in our minds? That when people praise me that it is dangerous for my spiritual perfection? But, when they despise me and say evil things against me falsely, I am blessed.

There is a beautiful story about one of the late bishops, his name was Bishop Youanis of Gharbia.⁴³ He used to travel by cab every Thursday and preach in a nearby village. It was not unusual to share a cab with other people in Egypt – almost like carpooling. It happened that this fanatic Muslim knew what time Bishop Youanis would take the cab and made sure that he would be there waiting for him. As soon as Bishop Youanis would enter the cab, this fanatic Muslim would turn to the other side and spit in disgust. He could not stand the bishop. This went on for several years. But one day, when the bishop went into the cab, that man (the driver) was not there. This bishop recalls this story and said that he was grieved in his heart. He started complaining to God saying, “Why did you deprive me of this blessing, Lord? Is it on account of my sins that You decided I am not worthy of this blessing?” When he was despised, he felt that he was blessed, but if he were to be praised, he would find that that blessing was not there.

We find that this theme was taken to a great extent among the fathers. They trained themselves to accept insults and reject praise in a very serious way. The book of the Paradise of

⁴³ Bishop Youannis (1923–1987) was bishop of the diocese of Gharbia in the north of Egypt. His secular name was Ramzy Azouz, and he was born in Shubra in 1923. He participated in the Sunday School movement as a young servant. As a bishop, he was a prolific author of spiritual and dogmatic works, including a classic of contemporary Coptic spirituality *The Paradise of the Spirit* [Bustān al-Rū], published by the press established by Met. Athanasius of Beni Suef.

the Fathers tells us some incredible stories in that regard. Let me share with you, two stories:

First, Abba Macarius told his novice disciple to and insult the dead. So out of obedience the novice went to the graveyard and started to shout insults at the dead for the whole day. The next day, Abba Macarius told him to go and praise the dead. He went to the graveyard and started heaping praise on the dead. When he had come back in the evening, his master (Abba Macarius) asked him, "When you insulted the dead, did they feel it?" He said "no", and again he asked him, "When you praised the dead, did they feel it?" He answered "no", and the old man said to the novice, "Go, and be like this." Do not let words of praise affect you and do not let words of insult affect you, except take the blessing that comes with the insult.⁴⁴

The other story is quite fascinating. It talks about a rich young man, who left all his wealth and his family and went into a monastery to become a monk. His Abba that would train him, said, "You need to train yourself to accept insults with joy." That was the practice that was given to the novice. But this novice looked around him, and there was no one to insult him in the monastery. They were all holy people and saintly people. So, he went to the village and hired a man to come to the monastery to insult him and paid him money to do this. He did this until he became very well trained in accepting insults with joy. However, one day this monk along with other monks, went into the city to finish some work for the monastery when a mad man came and started hurling insults at him. But the

⁴⁴ Macarius the Egyptian 23. John Wortley, *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2014), 186.

monk started to laugh out loud. The other monks asked him, “Why are you laughing? He is insulting you!” He said, “I used to pay for this, and now I am getting it for free!” That is how much they were willing to be trained – to that extent.⁴⁵

The Bible tells us, “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (1 John 2:15). And again “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” (James 4:4). Have we implanted this in our minds? The way to perfection is despising the world and all the things of it.

Have a look at another example. St Paul says, “Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ” (Philippians 3:8). He is saying that he would rather lose everything to gain the knowledge of Christ, and he considers all these things of the world as rubbish! If I look at the materialistic things and I am spell-bound by them, wanting to have them, keep them and live for, by and with them – is this not idol worship of some sort? My friend, we need to train our mind to despise worldly things, and only to covet and look for spiritual perfection.

Have a look at another example in scripture: “He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city” or in other translations, “...

⁴⁵ Abba John Colobos related this story. John Wortley, Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers, (St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2014), 140-141.

he who rules a city” (Proverbs 16:32). If you rule your own spirit, it is much better than ruling a whole city. Do I know that controlling my anger is strength and not weakness? It is easy to respond to angry words with more angry words - aggression with aggression in return. That is the easy way - the way of the weak. But to control my anger and not to respond in the same angry manner is the difficult way. It is the way of the strong and the mighty. I need to implant in my mind this concept of turning the other cheek. It is not cowardice, rather it is courage. You might say it is impossible to be done... how can a person live like this? But I say to you, it can be done.

There is a real story that happened in the 90s, when a monk went out to Cairo to do some necessary repairs for the monastery’s equipment. He drove into a narrow street where the car he was driving scratched another parked car. He enquired about the owner of the car, apologised, and offered to pay for the repairs and so forth. The owner of the other car was a fanatical Muslim and saw this as a good chance to vent his hatred toward Christians. So, the Muslim started to abuse this monk verbally, raised his hand and slapped him on the cheek. All this monk did was simply turn the other cheek. Of course, this made the man freeze in his footsteps, and he began to cry, apologising to the monk saying, “They tell us that you are bad people, but you are actually better than I am. You are better than us!” When he started to calm down a little, he asked the monk, “What brings you to Cairo? What brings you out of your monastery?” And when the monk told him about the repairs that he needed to have done for the equipment of the monastery, the man told him that he has a business that

fixes and repairs these things. He did not just repair these things for free, but he asked the monk to promise him that every time he needed repairs that he would go there and nowhere else. Turning the other cheek brings blessings.

One of the fathers said that if you turn the other cheek, you show them the side that still has goodness in it. It is still unhurt. You are showing them the face of Christ, that is, the goodness of Christ.⁴⁶ I do not think Christ desired that we become punching bags, that is not the meaning of it, but Christ wants us to show the other person what goodness is all about. To help them realise in their wicked mind what evil is all about and try to show them Christ instead.

We read another example from St Paul: “For I am hard-pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better” (Philippians 1:23) and again, “For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21). Do I implant in my mind that death is a gain and not a loss? Do I understand that to depart and be with Christ is far better? Have I trained my mind to covet for the things that scripture speaks of when it says, “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nether what the heart of man has comprehended” (1 Corinthians 2:9)? These are things of eternity. I need to have spiritual understanding of the true meaning of life and death. You see my dear friend; this is what the discipline of the mind is all about.

⁴⁶ Homily 18 on the Gospel of Matthew by John Chrysostom. Translated by George Prevost and revised by M.B. Riddle. From *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series*, Vol. 10. Edited by Philip Schaff. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1888.)

“A person’s will is a brazen wall [cf. Jer 1.18] and an immovable rock between him and God. If a person abandons it, he too says: ‘In my God I will leap over the wall’ (Psalm 18:30-31). But if self-justification combine with the will, a person is in a bad way.”

*Abba Poemen*⁴⁷

8.1

The Discipline of the Will

Let us start by looking at what St Paul writes in his letter to the Romans: “For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members” (Romans 7:22-23). The fathers tell us this means that each one of us has two wills. A higher will, or the inner man, which speaks after spiritual matters. It seeks for the things that are above, where Christ is sitting on the right hand of God. The other looks toward the lower or sensual will of the law of sin, which is in our members, that seeks after things of the world and of the flesh, as St Paul says in Romans 8:5.

⁴⁷ John Wortley, *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, (St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2014), 236.

These two wills seem to be at war with each other. Unfortunately, and for most people, the law of sin is victorious most of the time, and it brings into captivity the higher will, where it should be the other way around. Needless to say, of course the sensual will or the lower will or the law of sin is under the direction of Satan or the devil, our archenemy, and the higher will is under the direction of the grace of God. So, what is our goal, then, on this road to Christian perfection? It is to reverse this situation. In other words, to make the sensual will become captive to the higher will, or the will that abides by the grace of God.

It is a very difficult goal. Even St Paul himself almost laments about this difficulty. He says, "O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? (Romans 7:24) Of course, the devil is so clever! You know, if you succeed in having your higher will being in control of all matters, it is only just a matter of time that Satan changes his tactics in order to corrupt the higher will. He might convince somebody to do good works that are independent of the grace of God. Good works that are only for their own self-satisfaction, for the purpose of looking good in front of others; being noticeable, to be someone who will go down in history as having done something good. This is not pleasing to God because unless this higher will is for the glory of God, then it really falls short. Christians are often told, "Oh, what about all those people who do good in the world?" Yeah. It is great, they do great works, but I think we need to realise that it still falls short of the glory of God, because the intention is different.

So even if the devil fails, he will not stop at trying to tempt, or to take away from us the righteousness that belongs to us. That which God has rightly given to us, and that we sometimes neglect to take. We now realise in our own struggles in the spiritual life, that this war is vicious. Every time you fight, you seem to struggle and say, "Till when? When will it stop?" And, the thing is, we are expected to fight to the last breath. It is an ongoing fight, and you almost feel weary just thinking about it. "Am I going to keep fighting to that extent?" Yes, we must fight to the last breath.

St Paul warns us in his letter to the Hebrews, "You have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin" (Hebrews 12:4). That is how much our strive must be, to bloodshed. St Paul also reminds us saying, "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore, take up the whole armour of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand" (Ephesians 6:12-13). That is how much we need to be prepared for this.

St Peter says, "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour (1 Peter 5:8). So, it is an uphill battle that we must fight, and we are expected to win this fight. You might think that this is very difficult. You know what? Even the Lord Himself agrees 100% that it is difficult because the Lord Himself says, "narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it" (Matthew 7:14). But the good

news is that our adversary the devil, who roars like a lion (1 Peter 5:8) cannot force himself upon our free will.

The fathers of the church liken the devil to a vicious dog that is tied to a chain. Only if I enter his realm, then I will be attacked and devoured. If I keep away, I might only hear his barking, but will never be touched. The devil will only act as a clever salesman, if you like, who tries to sell his products to you. It is entirely up to us, whether we accept his sales pitch or reject it. Imagine being tricked by a good telemarketer many times over till you become experienced, and then you learn where they are coming from. You start to resist, oppose and to become very strict in opposing what they are trying to sell to you.

How many times have you heard a great salesperson when they say, “Congratulations if you buy this product, you win this trip overseas” or “You win this free TV”? And “Hang on... but wait, there is more.” or “If you buy this offer, we will double it.” There is always this enticement to spoil the person who accepts these ‘gifts’ or whatever. I know personally of a blessed man who simply tells this sort of salespeople, “It is against my religion to accept anything for free, because the Bible teaches us that we need to work for what we are trying to acquire.” Then excuse themselves and end the conversation.

It is the same with the devil. He will use his tricks and he will become very crafty in the way he uses his tricks. He will insist to make that sale to you, but it is up to you to say no, to resist, and to continue to resist. So then, how can I really resist, in spiritual terms, what the devil is trying to throw against me? The first thing is through prayer. Prayer here is when we bring

our weaknesses before God in conversation, then we can be safeguarded from the snares of Satan. Look at the beautiful first litany that we pray in the 11th hour of the book of hours (Agpeya): “If the Righteous One is scarcely saved, where shall I the sinner appear? The burden and the heat of the day I do not endure because of the weakness of my humanity.” I think it is this lowliness, when we present ourselves as lowly people in front of God in prayer, that the Lord looks upon us with mercy. We need to cry out with St Paul and say, “O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Romans 7:24) Who will deliver me from this body of death except you Lord? I cannot deliver myself; I am weak, I am unable to achieve anything without You. I need to say with the psalmist, “Have mercy on me O Lord, for I am weak” (Psalm 6:2). Remember, the devil cannot prevail against someone who acknowledges their weakness before God.

We have some beautiful examples in the *Paradise of the Father*. In his struggles with the demons, Abba Antony would say, “I am weaker than the least of you.”⁴⁸ And it was only when

⁴⁸ Stated in the Arabic sayings of Abba Antony: “When St. Anthony entered to the internal desert, the demons watched him dauntingly, saying, ‘O You young of age and mind, how did you dare to enter our territory, as we have never seen a human before you.’ And they all started to fight him. He said to them, ‘O strong ones, what do you want from me, the weak; And who am I so that you all gather to fight me. Don’t you know that I am ashes and dust, and unable to fight the smallest in you.’ And he lay on the ground, shouting to God, ‘O God, help me, and strengthen my weakness. Have mercy on me, as I sought after you. Do not leave me; and do not let those who think that I am something overcome me. O God, You know that I am unable to fight the smallest of these.’ When the demons heard this prayer full of life and humility they fled away, and did not dare to approach to him.” For the Arabic version of the vita, see Elizabeth, Agaiby, *The Arabic Life of Antony Attributed to Serapion of Thmuis*, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2018).

he admitted his weakness in that manner, that he was able to be victorious over them. He says, "Always breathe Christ, for you know the treachery of the demons, how fierce they are, but how little power they have. Wherefore fear them not, but rather always breathe Christ and trust him."⁴⁹ I love this term, *breathe Christ*. It is almost like He is your life, and He is the breath that you take. So, breathe Christ. Therefore, I must fight Satan through prayer, and through presenting my weakness before the Lord in prayer.

The second is that I also need to teach myself how to hate sin and the salesperson of sin. I suppose if we can hate, then this is the only hate command that we are able to follow is to hate sin and to hate Satan, who is the salesperson of sin. I need to remind myself that the "wages of sin are death" (Romans 6:23), and that sooner or later, I shall stand before the fearful judgment seat of Christ. I need to give an account of my life. I need to repeat in my mind often, the first litany of the 12th hour prayer before sleeping in the Agpeya when I say, "Behold, I am about to stand before the just judge, terrified and trembling because of my many sins." Prayer and the remembrance of the Judgment Day is a great defence. A person who is occupied with their eternity, is a person who is going to be very careful about everything that they go through in life, because they want to reach that eternity safely. They are going to be occupied with looking out for the snares of the devil because the Day of Judgment is clear before them.

⁴⁹ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Life of Anthony*, XCI (PG 26, 969).

Let us take a practical example. Imagine that a person verbally abuses you. Immediately the salesperson (Satan) comes and tries to convince you to defend your honour - not to let the abuser think that you are weak. And, after all, "it was the other person who started it. I am only acting in self-defence" etc. Of course, that is the sales pitch. He is trying to sell certain things to us. However, I need to diagnose the kind of thing that I am being sold here. I need to stop and think before this reaches my heart; I need to think about it in a logical sense. What do I need to do? Say to this sales pitch, "Get behind Me, Satan!" (Matthew 16:23) and "away with you, Satan!" (Matthew 4:10) like the Lord said to Satan when He was tempted. Do not think that the devil is going to obey you and will get behind you, instead, he will be just coming back and forward with you to drive this home and to make you buy his products.

We need to have our defences ready as well as train ourselves to hate the suggestions that the devil brings forward to us. We need to consider that these temptations come from nothing more than an enemy of Christ and an enemy of good, who wants to sell his products to us. I want to read with you a verse that might seem very hard to grasp. The psalmist says, "O daughter of Babylon, the wretched! Blessed is he who ceases your children and dashes them against the rock! (Psalm 137: 8-9). The fathers of the church tell us that the children of the daughter of Babylon are the evil thoughts that come to assail us and come to fire at us. I would take this horrible thought and dash it against the stones so that I can put it to death. It is not talking about a physical situation here of 'children being dashed against the rock' - No, it is talking about the evil thoughts that are being put away.

The Desert Fathers also teach us that there is a beautiful prayer from the book of Psalms that we need to use often, and it is actually a secret weapon that I can use against the salesman when he comes to offer his sales pitches to me. It says, "Make haste, O God, to deliver me! Make haste to help me, O Lord!" (Psalm 70:1). When I keep repeating this prayer many times in my mind, it will give me my peace again. The Desert Fathers also say that if you accompany this with signing yourself with the holy cross that this becomes so much more effective as well.

As we mentioned before, if we get rid of a bad thought, and we leave our mind empty, it becomes only a matter of time before Satan will plant some other thought. We need to fill this empty mind now with some good. In other words, I need to do an act of charity towards this aggressor. This is what God commands from us; that we do an act of charity towards this aggressor.

Therefore, to seek perfection here does not mean that I only must stop thinking bad thoughts, but I must plant a virtue in its place. This is what the Psalms tell us: "Depart from evil and do good" (Psalm 34:4). Notice the two extremes, "depart from evil and do good, seek peace and pursue it." So that is what I need to do in order to plant something else instead. That is the very thing that the Lord commanded us to do. He said, "But love your enemies, do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most-High. For He is kind to the unthankful and evil" (Luke 6:35). Of course, it is that these exercises cannot be successful without putting into practice the training that I mentioned previously, that is, the discipline of the mind.

I remind you of two verses that we stated before, because I think they sum up what it means to have discipline of the mind. You remember that the Lord told us, "Woe to you, when all men speak well of you" (Luke 6:26). So, I am in danger when everybody speaks well of me. Can you imagine that? He also says, "Blessed are you when men hate you, and when they exclude you, and revile you, and cast out your name is evil for the Son of Man sake, rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for indeed your reward is great in heaven" (Luke 6:22-23).

You see, we need to make sure that things are balanced in our own mind. Again, we do not interpret this to mean that we should be abused or become punching bags. I think the Lord here is saying that when you turn the other cheek, you are showing people the good side of the Lord, the side that is unhurt, the side of goodness, and there is no better goodness than the Lord Himself. In spite of all this, the war can be relentless, as we all know, and the thoughts can keep coming back to us, as if like unceasing waves - they just keep crashing against us, time after time. To be able to fight back, we must memorise some verses to use in our battle against the enemy. For example, the powerful and comforting words, "The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life, of whom shall I be afraid? When the wicked came against me to eat at my flesh, my enemies, and foes, they stumbled and fell. Though an army may camp against me, my heart shall not fear. Though war might rise against me in this, I will be confident" (Psalm 27:1-3). Imagine how comforting this is when I repeat it to myself when bad thoughts are just relentless.

Also, there are other things that I can use to help me along this path of spiritual perfection. I need to seek the help of the

Virgin St. Mary. This was something that a lot of the Desert and Church Fathers concentrated on. Look at the beautiful prayer that we recite in the third litany of the twelfth hour in the Agbeya, which is the prayer before sleeping: “O holy virgin, overshadow your servant with your instant help and keep the waves of evil thoughts away from me and raise my ailing soul for prayer and ritual.”

One of the elders of Mt Athos says, “The most holy Mother of God prays for us ceaselessly. She is always visiting us. Whenever we turn to her in our heart, she is there. After the Lord she is the greatest protection for mankind.”⁵⁰ St Ephraim the Syrian also said some beautiful words about St Mary: “O Virgin Lady and Mother of God. You who did bear Christ, our Saviour and God in your womb, I place all my hope on you. In you do I trust, for you are higher than all the powers of the heaven. You who is all pure, protect me by your own powerful prayers.”⁵¹ This is how great her intercession is. In fact, like St Paul, we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses who are the holy saints that intercede for us. St Clement of Alexandria says, “Though the Christian may pray alone he has the choir of the

⁵⁰ “The Most Holy Mother of God prays for us ceaselessly. She is always visiting us. Whenever we turn to her in our heart, she is there. After the Lord, she is the greatest protection for mankind. How many churches there are in the world that are dedicated to the Most Holy Mother of God! How many healing springs where people are cured of their ailments have sprung up in places where the Most Holy Theotokos appeared and blessed those springs to heal both the sick and the healthy! She is constantly, by our side, and all too often we forget her.” Ana Smiljanic, *Our Thoughts Determine Our Lives: The Life and Teachings of Elder Thaddeus of Vitovnica*, (St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2013).

⁵¹ Antonina Janda, Isaac E. Lambertsen, *Spiritual Psalter or Reflections on God from the Works of our Holy Father St. Ephraim the Syrian, Arranged in the Manner of the Psalms of David, Together with the Life of St. Ephrem*, (Saint John of Kronstadt Press, 1997).

saints standing with him.”⁵² When you think you are alone, you are actually among a cloud of witnesses, praying with you, and interceding on your behalf.

There is a beautiful story of a priest who was commissioned by St Pope Kyrillos VI to go and pray in a small church that was in a small village. Out of obedience, this priest went, and he prayed vespers and the liturgy, then went back to report to the Pope. The Pope said, “How did you go?” He said, “Your holiness, I went, and I prayed with empty pews. Nobody was there. It is a small village.” In simplicity, Pope Kyrillos replied, “Do not be upset, go, and they will come. Just go again.” So, he did. They say that this priest saw in the pews of the church, all the great saints, fathers, and martyrs of the church. He was praying in the presence of the martyrs and the saints, and all the holy people in the history of the church. We are not alone when we stand and pray.

Again, coming back to the prayers of Agbeya. These were put in place by the Fathers of the Church to help us in this war between the two wills. If bad thoughts keep coming to attack us, we must also remember that those who are with us are far more than those who are against us. Let me relate to you a beautiful story from Scripture. One day, an evil king got his army together and came against Elisha the prophet, the prophet of the Lord. Elisha had a servant who was working with him named Gehazi. Gehazi looked upon a mountain and he saw chariots and weapons surrounding the evil army and he feared greatly. But Elisha told him, “Do not fear, for those

⁵² “Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata*, Book VII” in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 2, eds., by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885.)

who are with us or more than those who are with them" (2 Kings 6:16). Elisha prayed to the Lord and he said, "Lord, I pray open the eyes, the eyes of the lad Gehazi that he may see." Then Lord opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw. The mountains were full of horses and chariots of fire, all around Elisha (2 Kings 6:17).

Do not underestimate how much support you have that can fight alongside you. This happened to Abba Moses the strong. His story tells us that evil thoughts kept assailing him, and every time he went to his father of confession, Abba Isidore to tell him about these thoughts that were bothering him. He would never stop fighting these thoughts. He went to his father of confession fourteen times in one night, complaining about these thoughts, Abba Isidore took him up to the top of his cell and told him, "Look to the west, and tell me what you see." Abba Moses said, "I see demons throwing fiery darts against the monks." Then Abba Isidore said, "Now look to the east and what do you see?" He told him, "I see angels defending the monks against the demons' fiery darts." And he asked, "Who are more? Those who assail us, or those who defend us?" And Abba Moses the strong said, "Those who defend us." Immediately when he realised this, the evil thoughts ceased to attack him.⁵³ Therefore, when those evil thoughts are attacking you, know that there is a cloud of witnesses there fighting alongside with you.

Resisting the thoughts that the enemy implants in our minds, has its rewards. Try to resist evil thoughts and see how

⁵³ Abraham J. Malherbe, Everett Ferguson, and John Myendorff, eds., *The Life of Moses by Gregory of Nyssa*, (Paulist Press, 1978).

much of a reward you receive. There is a beautiful story in the Paradise of the Fathers, that shows us there are crowns awaiting those who resist these evil thoughts, or any thought that is not edifying. It talks about a young monk who lived with his abbot. He was in the habit of never going to sleep until he had prostrated himself before the Abba for a blessing every night, as a symbol of obedience and submission. One night he came and prostrated himself and said, "Bless me, Abba." However, his abbot was asleep. He remained there hoping that the abbot would wake up. But the Abba kept sleeping and did not wake up all night. It happened that during his sleep, the Abba saw seven angels putting seven crowns on the head of his disciple. In the morning, when the Abba had awoken, he said to the disciple, "What happened during the night?" The young man said to him, "Forgive me Abba, but during the night, seven times, thoughts came to me to leave you and go to bed without received your blessing. But every time I resisted the thought." The Abba knew of course that the seven crowns were for resisting these thoughts. The Abba related the story to the other monks, but would not tell his disciple this story, lest he fall into pride.

When we plant good thoughts instead of evil ones, then the salesperson of evil things will not be able to plant any thoughts in our minds. Again, there are many examples how we can do that. If the devil for example, puts the thought of murmuring and complaining in your mind, because of whatever situation you are going through, you need to resist that. For example, if I failed an exam, or I am going through some sort of mishap or a difficulty, I need to fight these thoughts of murmuring against the Lord and say, "Thank you, Lord. Thank you, Lord in these

difficult times.” Yes, in the difficult times. Because thankfulness is a beautiful virtue that we need to learn, no matter what the circumstances.

We heard this beautiful story by the late Bishop Epiphanius (1954-2018),⁵⁴ when he was here in Melbourne just two weeks before he passed away. He told us a story about a mother who had come to complain to him about her daughter who was lost. She had left the fold of Christ and she lived away from Christ. The mother was very distraught about her daughter not being with Christ. Bishop Epiphanius said to her, “Have you thanked God that your daughter is away from Christ?” She said to him, “Sorry, excuse me? Have I thanked the Lord because my daughter is away from Christ?” He said to her, “Try. Try to be thankful for every situation that you are going through.” And, as related to us by Bishop Epiphanius, the mere moment she started to thank the Lord for her daughter not being with Christ, her daughter started to communicate with her again and came back to her, and to Christ. Thankfulness can change a situation around. In the beginning, you might be thanking just by your tongue, but after a while, it is your heart that becomes thankful. Your heart along with your tongue will become thankful for everything that you go through, even if it might seem miserable, but thankfulness can change a situation around.

Moreover, if thoughts of anger consistently come against the person, then you need to take it a little bit further. It is not just about thankfulness now, but it is about making excuses

⁵⁴ Anba Epiphanius (June 27, 1954 – July 29, 2018) was a Coptic Orthodox Church bishop. He was appointed as the bishop and abbot of the Monastery of St Macarius in 2013, a position he held until his death on July 29, 2018.

for the person who has come against you or has wronged you. What do I mean by that? For example, if I invent an excuse for a person who has wronged me, imagine the peacefulness it will grant you into your heart. Try to give excuses about that person who has wronged you next time and see how much peace of mind it will grant you. It is hard. It is not easy. But think about the peacefulness that you will live by. If you pray and say, "Lord, forgive him and forgive me." How much mercy will come upon you and upon the other person as well? In doing that you are starting to live the life of freedom because nothing bad is affecting you.

St John Climacus says, "The beginning of freedom from anger is silence of the lips." You do not retaliate. He says, "It is silence of the lips when the heart is agitated... In the middle of freedom (or the middle path of freedom) is silence of the thoughts when there is a mere disturbance of the soul. And the end of freedom... Is the imperturbable calmness under the breath of unclean winds."⁵⁵ In other words, in the most difficult of times, you will actually feel a sense of freedom inside you because you are not harbouring any judgment, or anything that might come your way, no matter who it comes from.

One more important thing that we need to take on, is the need to ask for the prayers of others or ask for the prayers of my confession father. You can say to Abuna, "Abuna, the salesperson is almost convincing me of buying his product, please support me with your prayers." When you ask for the prayers of your family or friends, or community, these are not

⁵⁵ Archimandrite Lazarus Moore, *John Climacus: The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, (Boston: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 2001), 81.

just words that we should be using, they are actually a reality because when there is a community of prayers surrounding me, that can really shake things to the core. Remember the days of the apostles, the prison walls were shaken, broken and open, because the whole church was praying for the apostles who were imprisoned (Acts 4). Do not underestimate how much prayers can save you and help you along your struggle.

To conclude with, there is a beautiful story about a monk who was sent by his father of confession to do some tasks in the city. When he went into the house that he was supposed to go to, this lady started to entice him to sleep with her. He immediately cried out, "Lord, through the prayers of my father of confession, please save me." At the utterance of these words, he immediately found himself on the road back to the monastery. The angels had snatched him from the place where he was and took him back to the road toward to the monastery.

You may not be snatched in physical terms, but God will grant you that strength, through the prayers that are being offered for you, to be able to get out of the situation where sin might abound. See, I think sometimes we have forgotten the main duty of the priest. We tend to get caught up maybe as clergy with a lot of issues and things like that. However, the mere name of the priest comes from the word Πρεσβύτερος, which means intercessor. One who must pray. This is his main duty. That he prays for you, for your wellbeing, peace of mind your, and your salvation. This is the most important duty of the priest. Therefore, when you ask for the prayers of the priest, or prayers of anyone else for that matter, then definitely that is a great deal.

*"If only a man desired it for a single day
from morning till night, he would be
able to come to the measure of God."*

*Abba Alonius*⁵⁶

8.2

The Discipline of the Senses

Theophan the recluse talks about a king (the soul) who lives in a castle (the body). The castle has five windows and a door. These five windows are the five senses, and the door is the mind. He says, "The enemy cannot enter into the castle except through the windows or the door."⁵⁷ In other words, if these are firmly shut, the enemy cannot enter the castle. Through these windows, the salesman of sin, who is Satan, can bring in samples of different experiences or sensations that can delight the soul. Out of these, the soul bundles together a circle of comfort and pleasure, which is what we call fun. So, the soul comes to consider the circle of pleasure as its primary good and goal. You have heard of the saying: "If it feels good, do it." Well, this is how the worldly people think. A person who wants to really strive toward

⁵⁶ John Wortley, *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2014), 72.

⁵⁷ E. Kadloubovsky, and G.E.H. Palmer, trans., *Unseen Warfare*, (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1987), 147-155.

Christian perfection must re-establish the proper and original order that God desires from each of our lives. That is to find comfort in God, and not to find comfort in fun or the worldly matters. It is easier said than done, because sometimes we take this decision, and yet the struggle is long and difficult.

You can imagine that after many years, if a person has become accustomed to finding fun in a particular issue or a particular thing, then it is very hard to wean our soul out of this in order to get rid of this habit. There is a beautiful story about a monk who was walking in the desert with his disciple. He said to his disciple, "Pluck out this blade of grass from the ground." And he, very easily with only two fingers, plucked out the blade of grass. As they walked further, he found another tiny plant in the ground. Again, he said to his disciple, "Please, pluck this out." He grabbed it with his hand and plucked it out. As they walked further, there was another plant that was a bit bigger, and it took a little more strength with both hands to pull it out. As they went further and came to a tree, he said, "Pluck the tree out." And of course, he was unable to do it. The lesson is that the more we exercise our senses to be God-fearing, and practice is earlier, than we prevent things from coming into our life, weaning ourselves off these things after they have already taken root. It is not an easy situation, but as much as possible, this is what will get us onto the road toward spiritual perfection.

Each sense has its pleasant and unpleasant subjects. A soul delights in pleasurable things, becomes addicted to them, and it lusts after them. Even when a person weans himself or herself off a particular thing, the matter may come up into

the life of the person again, and they might find that there is a rush of memories that will come back from the desire that they are trying to get off or something that they have left for a while. All the memories can rush back, and makes this lust reignited within the soul, and it becomes a chain reaction. St James tells us in his epistle, "Then when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and sin when it is full grown brings forth death" (James 1:15). Now, the saying of Jeremiah also has been fulfilled. He says, "For this has come through our windows, has entered our palaces" (Jeremiah 9:21).

Remember the analogy that Theophan the Recluse says that a man is like a king or a soul. He lives in a castle and his castle is a body with the five senses as windows and the soul as the door. Then how can we discipline our senses? What are the issues that we might face for each of our senses? The discipline of senses is twofold. Not only should we prevent our senses from wondering about and getting harmful impressions, or bad things to be filled with, but we should also train them to receive profitable impressions from every creature and all things. Everyone that you deal with, everything that you see, must put an impression into your senses that he is God-fearing. Well, let us go through them one at a time.

The Discipline of the Eyes.

There are many verses in Scripture that exhort us to discipline our eyes. The Gospel of St Matthew says, "The lamp of the body is the eye. If therefore your eye is good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in you is darkness, how great is that darkness?" (Matthew 6:22-

23) Also in the same Gospel, “If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you. For it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell” (Matthew 5:29). Again, “But I say to you, that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her, in his heart” (Matthew 5:28). These are very clear verses about the discipline of the eyes. I suppose in antiquity, the eye could have been much purer than in our days; that keeping the eye pure could have been easier. I mean, nowadays, society seems to have become so relaxed in what it does, that it makes it much more difficult to have discipline of the eyes. For example: dress code, these days, can be so offensive. There are many ways that the devil or the salesman of sin can introduce impurity into our eyes. Magazines, books, and billboards ... everywhere that we look, we are bombarded by the things that are obscene or not holy.

It seems that society is gradually increasing its tolerance for these things. What you see now on television or hear on the radio, you would have never seen five or ten years ago. Even department stores now, we find big paintings that show things that are quite explicit. One of the servants was telling me that he invited some of his children to his home to watch a movie together, and as soon as he turned the television on, by chance, it happened to be just something that was not appropriate on one of the movies. We are bombarded by these things. Everything has sexual innuendos, and nothing is truly short of pornographic material. Even now, parents are concerned about things like cartoons, and what sly messages are being given to our children that infiltrate their minds. To add moreover, the problem of the internet has made these

matters at our fingertips, for both adults and children. They are bombarded by material that is there at their fingertips. Anyone can access it, anywhere, anytime. In trying to wean our eyes, from these things, we have got a lot that we need to do. Look back with me to the book of Genesis, which tells us something very important and something good to reflect upon. It says, "The sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were beautiful, and they took wives for themselves of all whom they chose" (Genesis 6:2). We find that this was actually disastrous, because immediately after that, the Lord says, "I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth. Both men and beast, creeping thing, and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them" (Genesis 6:3). You see, when the sons of God looked at the daughters of the world or the daughters of men, and they were enticed by looking and lusting after them, it led to the destruction of mankind. Further, look at the life of David. It is a stern reminder for each one of us how dangerous it is for the eye to wander about without any control. How carelessness of eyesight has turned the author of the book of Psalms into an adulterer and a murderer. David, who's heart was likened to the heart of God, when the Lord said, "I have searched the heart of David, the son of Jesse and found his heart to be according to my own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14), when he allowed his eyes to wander, he fell into so many problems.

I suppose it is one thing to encounter these things by chance and it is another thing totally to go looking for these things. The result is much worse for the latter than the former. I strongly believe that when these things come to us by chance, the Christ of God covers for them. It is only when I go for that

second look, and the third look, and the more looks that I do, the less that the grace of God will cover for it. If it comes by chance, the grace of God will cover for our shortcomings. However, if I look out for them and search for them and diligently go after them, then I am putting myself into a lot of trouble. Even looking at and lusting for other things, even things like food, cars, houses, furniture, clothes, computers, toys, and the list goes on, is another sin that we might commit with the eyes. The Lord Jesus Christ was actually tempted in this way when the salesman of sin, Satan, showed the Lord Jesus, all the kingdoms of the world and their glory, and then Satan said to the Lord, "All these things I will give you, if you will fall down and worship for me" (Matthew 4:9). It is nothing new, even the Lord Himself was tempted by these things.

And the devil is still using the same tricks today to tempt us to covet to earthly things. But the Lord resisted Satan and He used verses from scripture to answer Satan. We can do the same. We can keep verses in mind in order to fight Satan. For example, I can remind myself about what St John says: "If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him" (1 John 2:15). If I go after loving things of the world, I should remind myself then, that maybe the love of the Father is not in me. If I remind myself of what James says: "Friendship with the world is enmity with God. Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world, makes himself an enemy of God" (James 4:4). When I remind myself of these verses, then I can resist Satan when he comes to me, to give me these glamorous things of the world in order to entice me.

Also, the evil eye or the envious eye is another way that the eye can offend us. Scripture talks about this quite readily. So how can I properly use my eyes? Well, we should not only train our eyes not to look or lust at anyone or anything, but also, we need to train our eyes to see God, in everyone and in everything. We should make sure that we have the Godly eye, the simple eye. There are many examples of the fathers of the desert, who show us how to have this simple eye. One time, a monk was sent by superior to Alexandria on a task. When he came back, the other monks asked him, "What is Alexandria like?" They have lived in the monastery all their life, they wanted to know what Alexandria was like. He simply answered them and said, "I did not purpose to look at anything in Alexandria." He went for a particular purpose did not look anywhere else. His eyes were focused on what he needed to do.⁵⁸ That was his only business. He did not go there for sightseeing, or to look at other things. This may seem a little strange to us - why not enjoy the beauty of Alexandria? No, this was a monk who was walking the road of perfection by making sure that he is focused on what he was asked to do.

Are we focused on things that we are meant to be doing, or are our eyes looking everywhere else? I love the beautiful

⁵⁸ "Abba Isidore went one day to see Abba Theophilus, archbishop of Alexandria and when he returned to Scetis the brethren asked him, 'What is going on in the city?' But he said to them, 'Truly, brothers, I did not see the face of anyone there, except that of the archbishop.' Hearing this they were very anxious and said to him, 'Has there been a disaster there, then, abba?' He said, 'Not at all, but the thought of looking at anyone did not get the better of me.' At these words they were filled with admiration and strengthened in their intention of guarding the eyes from all distraction." John Wortley, *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2014), 145.

saying by St John Chrysostom: "If you do not see Christ in a beggar on the street, you will not see him in a chalice."⁵⁹ See, these are the Godly eyes that can only see spiritual matters. We need to train our souls in the same manner to look at things in simplicity and in Godly way. For example, if I see a beautiful person of the opposite sex, instead of rather turning him or her into an object of desire and lust, I should thank God the Creator who made such a beautiful person. Say, "Thank you, Lord, for this creation. Thank you, Lord, for the beauty that you have created in people. Thank you, Lord, that I will see this brother or sister in heaven and live eternity with them." How can I lust after someone when I will be spending eternity with them there in paradise? How am I going to deal with them in paradise, if I have been lusting after them here in this world? Again, we need to have this simple eye and I think this is what the Lord meant when he said, "If your eye is simple, your whole body will be full of light" (Matthew 6:2; Luke 11:34). And similarly, if we see for example, a beautiful home, imagine how much more the Heavenly home is going to be more beautiful. If this home is so beautiful, and it is here on Earth, how much more beautiful is the house that is not built with hands, that You Lord are preparing for me, particularly? He says, "My Father's house has many mansions I go and prepare a place for you" (John 14:2). Another exercise the fathers used to use was, whenever they saw objects, they would meditate on the passion of the Lord Jesus Christ for the objects that they saw, as much as possible. For example, if they saw the rope or some sort of tying material, they would meditate on how the Lord was bound for their sake and for their sins. If they see a

⁵⁹ See footnote #11 in chapter 3 of this book.

nail, they remember the nails that pierced the hands and the feet of the Lord, and so forth.

Well, what do I then, if I unintentionally see something that is offensive? Especially because it is all around us, and we are bound to see it. The fathers tell us that you need to remove it from your mind and remove it very quickly. If we try to bring this into a 21st century mind frame, when you drag an object on your desktop and take it to the rubbish bin, it is almost a wilful act that you have taken. Dragging it and dumping it in the bin. That is what we need to do in our own minds, in our own hearts. It is almost an intense act of the will, to blank out this image and to delete it quickly, rather than to let this image stay with you and be ingrained in your soul that will cause you problems later on. Again, I suppose this is what the Lord meant by saying, “That if your eye offends you, pluck it out and throw it out” (Matthew 5:29; Matthew 18:9). His not talking here in a physical sense, but in the spiritual sense. In other words, get rid of the image that has made your eye not simple anymore.

The Discipline of the Ears

One of the things that might be an offense to the ear is music, particularly bad music, bad lyrics, or even blasphemous lyrics. Sometimes, when you hear certain music you feel like it is almost the devil who is beating the drums. It is almost like a satanic sort of pounding of the drums or of the music. One of the most offensive media that we have today is music videos whereby people turn on the television to watch music videos, and are bombarded by lustful lyrics, sung in a very immodest

way. The eyes are bombarded with these very lustful scenes as well. Bad music, whether we would like to admit it or not, affects our minds, the words itself will affect our minds. The words will stick in our minds and will keep repeating themselves in our minds while we are working or walking or even praying or doing anything else. We must be careful with regards to the ears when it comes to music and lyrics of music.

Another offense is hearing heretical talk. Heretical talk or watching heretical programs on TV. You know, when you are home on Sunday morning and you turn the television, some channels still have some religious programs, you might find that there are nice, sweet words from the Bible. However, if you delve carefully into the meaning and what they are trying to deliver, and be critical about what is being said, you will notice that there is always a bit of poison hidden in what they are saying. For example, they might not concentrate on the sacramental life for the Christian person, but only concentrates on successes. They will say, "the Lord is your Saviour, and you are saved! There is no need for anything else beyond that!" At the same time, they are talking about to work toward financial gain through Jesus.

What about something like listening to or engaging in gossip? That is also an offense to the ears. Maybe you might think *I do not partake in gossip*, but even hearing gossip is a sin. That desire to know the affairs of others is equated by St James the Apostle to murder and stealing (James 3&4). St Peter also says, "But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evil doer or as a busybody in other people's matters" (1 Peter 4:15). These are what he likens a busy body to. Listening to

gossip will eventually lead us to judging others. I might even form wrong impressions about others.

Ultimately, we may even start to spread rumours about others as a result of listening to these things or listening to other people tell me that a certain person has been talking about us behind our back. Be very careful when somebody approaches you and says, “this person is saying bad things about you behind your back.” You might start to hate that person and not want to talk to them. What we do not realise, is that the person who is reporting to you these things, by their very report, is himself or herself talking about someone else behind their back. So how do I solve this? Well, you smile back, and you say to this person, “Please, come and let the three of us meet together so we can solve this issue out.” And most likely they will refuse. Remember that, of course, a person is innocent unless proven otherwise. So be careful that when people come and talk to you and say, “This person or that person is talking behind your back.” What about other offenses? What about listening to vain and empty talk? That is also another sin. Remember what the Lord has said: “But I say to you, that for every idle word men may speak, there will give account of it on the Day of Judgment” (Matthew 12:36).

St Macarius, after the liturgy, would go out of the church and place his hand over his mouth, and he would say, “Flee brethren.” They would respond, “Flee from what Father?” And he would say “Flee from this.” And he would shut his mouth with his hand. Flee from vain an empty talk.⁶⁰ A monk that

⁶⁰ John Wortley, *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2014), 184.

would see angels coming and surrounding them when they are talking about Godly matters, and yet he would see pigs and smell an awful smell when they participate in idle talk. We must be careful about vain and empty talk. That is also a sin and it can be an offence.

Finally, one more, a very difficult offense to get rid of is listening to flattery, that is, being flattered by other people. We all like it, of course, when people say good things about us, when they praise us, but do not forget what the Lord said: "Woe to you, when all men speak well of you" (Luke 6:26). And actually, if you go back to your scripture, and you carefully read the book of Daniel, you find that flattery is going to be one of the most potent weapons that the Antichrist will use to deceive people, even the elect (Daniel 11). Flattery will be used by the Antichrist to deceive people in the end of times. How then can I properly use my ears? It is no coincidence that the Lord said, "He who has ears, let him hear."

Everybody has ears. We know people have ears as a physical organ. But whether people have the spiritual discernment in what they hear and what they listen to is another question. How do we properly use our ears? Again, we need to wane our ears from bad things that they have been accustomed to hearing. We need to exercise our self in the discipline of the ears. Just as we fast or our mouth fasts, from food during fasting days/seasons, so also should our ears fast from bad music, gossip, all unnecessary things like spending long time on phone calls or idle chatter and so forth.

We can train our ears to perceive God in everything that we hear. For example, if I hear a beautiful tune or a beautiful

hymn or a beautiful song, I can think to myself and say, “How beautiful will Heaven be, if this hymn is so beautiful and so moving? How is this going to be in Heaven? How much more so will it be in Heaven?”

We can also meditate on spiritual matters when we hear, for example, my alarm clock on the phone. We can say to ourselves, “now it is high time to awake up from sleep, for now my salvation is nearer than when I first believed” (Romans 13:11). When we train our ears to behave in that way, we will be certain that we are hearing proper and nice things. One of the fathers, whenever he would hear a cry from a little baby in the church, he would say, “This is by far more powerful than any seminar I will ever give.” It shows that this little child is chanting God through the crying, which is much more powerful than any good sermon that he has prepared or given. So again, we need to train our ears in order to hear properly.

The Discipline of the Tongue

This is the sense of taste and speaking. Believe it or not, having a liking for gourmet food all the time, or vice versa, to have a disliking for humble foods, is not the way of spiritual perfection. Remember our mother Eve? One bite into the forbidden fruit was disastrous (Genesis 2:4-3:2). Amos the Prophet says, “Who lie on beds of ivory, stretch out on your couches, eat lambs from the flock and calves from the midst of the stall” (Amos 6:4). It is not about the type of food here, but it is about the excessively luxurious living style.

Also remember the parable of the rich man. The Gospel of St Luke says that “he fared sumptuously every day” (Luke

16:19-31). Here, the gospel emphasises the words “every day”. It is not a sin to eat delicious food occasionally, or maybe daily, but I need to also make sure that I am not living this luxurious life beyond measure. There is nothing wrong with eating luxurious food of course. Even the father of the prodigal son ordered them to bring the fatted calf for a feast to be merry because it was a joyous occasion (Luke 15:11-32). Even the fathers of the desert used to break their very strict diet of dry bread, salt, and water whenever they had a guest. And they really splurged when they had a guest.⁶¹ On the other hand, others were clever and did find another way to combat this. A master told his disciples, “Boil us a few lentils for the sake of the guest.” One of the stories mentions that the disciple boiled a handful of lentils for the guest. They brought it up to sing the Psalms, and then they read two of the prophetic books. When

⁶¹ This concept is known as *hospitality* among the desert fathers. For example, “Some of the hermits once came to Joseph in Panepho, to ask him if they should break their fast when they received brothers as guests, to celebrate their coming. Before they asked their question, Joseph said to them, ‘Think about what I am going to do today.’ He put two seats made of reeds tied in bundles, one on his left and the other on his right, and said, ‘Sit down.’ Then he went into his cell and put on rags; he came out, and walked past them, and then went in again and put on his ordinary clothes. The visitors were astonished and asked him what it meant. He said to them, ‘Did you see what I did?’ They said, ‘Yes.’ He said, ‘Did the rags change me for the better?’ They said, ‘No.’ He said, ‘Did good clothes change me for the worse?’ They said, ‘No.’ He said, ‘So I am myself whether I wear good clothes or rags. I was not changed for better or worse because I changed my clothes. That is how we ought to be when we receive guests. It is written in the Holy Gospel, ‘Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s’ (Matt. 22:21). When visitors come, we should welcome them and celebrate with them. It is when we are by ourselves that we ought to be sorrowful.’ When they heard this, they were amazed that he knew what they intended to ask him, and they praised God.” John Wortley, *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, (St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2014), 150.

morning came, they forgot about the boiled lentils.⁶² So, had they really splurged?

St Paul says, “Everywhere and in all things, I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need” (Philippians 4:12). That means I can enjoy a good meal, but I can also enjoy hunger. To use an understanding relevant for today, if the food that is offered to me at home is not of the best quality rather than murmur and complain, to accept it with humility. I can eat delicious food sometimes, but I can also eat humble food when it is time for fasting, which is one of the elements of fasting. Now they say the three elements of fasting are:

1. The path of abstinence - not eating for a certain period of the day;
2. The quality of food;
3. And the quantity of food.

Three elements that are important to fast. I need to train my tastebuds to be content with whatever food there is.

What about other sins of the tongue? The tongue is not only an organ of taste, but it is also an organ of speech. Swearing or lying, gossiping, or speaking the Lord’s name in vain (which of course we confess whenever we fall into), but here, I want to mention other sins of the tongue that sometimes we do not confess because sometimes we do not think that they are

⁶² Wallis Budge, *The Paradise of the Holy Fathers* Vol.2, (Australia: St. Shenouda Coptic Orthodox Monastery, 2009).

actually sins. For example, talkativeness. Is that a sin? Well, let us look at what the Scripture tells us. The book of Proverbs says, "In the multitude of words, saying is not lacking, but he who restrains his lips is wise" (Proverbs 10:19). Also, in the same book, "He who has knowledge, spares his words" (Proverbs 17:27). Ecclesiastes tells us that, "a fool's voice is known by his many words" (Ecclesiastes 5:3). So, perhaps excessive talk is also a sin. I suppose the greatest warning about excessive talking comes from the Lord Himself. The Gospel of Matthew says, "But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned" (Matthew 12:36). That means every word that I say unnecessarily, I will have to give an account of that on the Day of Judgement.

The apostles tell us that excessive talk is a sign of pride because a person who talks a lot is a person who thinks that they have wisdom and they know a lot. They feel almost obliged to share this to the whole world. Excessive talking is the mother of gossip and backbiting and it ruins people's reputations. It is the cause of arguments and boasting. You know, a person who excessively talks usually embellishes his stories with exaggerations and half-truths to attract the admiration of people. All these idle words that we have spoken, we will be asked to give an account for on the Judgement Day.

The fathers of the desert took this sin very seriously. They almost strove to have the virtue of silence in various ways. We know the beautiful saying of Abba Arsenius when he said, "Many times, I have spoken and regretted, but I have never

regretted silence.”⁶³ The first step in combating the sin is to realise that sometimes we do not think that when we talk a lot it is actually a sin. We must exercise self-control and practice silence. One of the fathers used to put a little pebble underneath the tongue in order to make sure that they do not talk excessively.⁶⁴ When they were attacked by someone, before they respond, they would feel this pebble in their mouth and would remind themselves of self-control by biting their tongue so as not to speak and not to answer back.

What about giving advice? Is giving advice a sin? Yes, in some circumstances it is. What are the circumstances? Firstly, if the advice is given without being asked for. Imagine if I am giving advice to somebody who had not asked for it. Secondly, I may not be qualified to give advice. See, the problem is that when we are asked for advice, we instantly become experts in the subject that we are talking about even if we do not know anything about it. We put ourselves in a position where people

⁶³ The full saying is this: “When Abba Arsenius was at the point of death, his disciples were troubled. He said to them, ‘The time has not yet come; when it comes, I will tell you. But if ever you give my remains to anyone, we will be judged before the dreadful seat of judgment.’ They said to him, ‘What shall we do? We do not know how to bury anyone.’ The old man said to them, ‘Don’t you know how to tie a rope to my feet and drag me to the mountain?’ The old man used to say to himself: ‘Arsenius, why have you left the world? I have often repented of having spoken, but never of having been silent.’ When his death drew near, the brethren saw him weeping and they said to him ‘Truly, Father, are you also afraid?’ ‘Indeed,’ he answered them, ‘the fear which is mine at this hour has been with me ever since I became a monk.’ Upon this he fell asleep.” John Wortley, *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, (St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2014), 51.

⁶⁴ “It was said of Abba Agathon that for three years he lived with a stone in his mouth, until he had learnt to keep silence.” John Wortley, *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, (St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2014), 57.

think that we are an expert. There are a few of those who really know real wisdom and courage to say, "I do not know." It is better to say I do not know rather than to speak your mind.

Imagine also if we have given advice to a person particularly in serious matters. We have become responsible then for the behaviour of that person because we have given them that advice. Wrong advice may be taken on by the person into their lives and they live by it. One thing you can say to your friend is, "Look, I am sorry, I am not an expert in this, I will pray for you and pray with you." Maybe refer them to somebody else who can help them or write their name. Put their name on the altar during the liturgies and pray for them.

The Discipline of the Smell

What about the sense of smell? Even the sense of smell can provoke bad thoughts and feelings in a person. For example, strong smelling perfumes can produce lustful desires in the flesh. Believe it or not, the Bible even speaks about this too. The prophet Amos says, "Woe to you who anoint yourselves with the best ointments" (Amos 6:6). If the Scripture talks about this sort of thing, then people should be very careful that they do not use strong smelling perfumes or aftershave that could be a stumbling block to others. Particularly during fasting days, if you walk in past a hamburger or pizza shop, or even the neighbours having a barbecue on a fasting day, it becomes very tempting to break the fast. The fathers have a very simple solution for this. They say it is very simple, just do not inhale. Bishop Abraam of Fayum (1829-1914),⁶⁵ once

⁶⁵ St Abraam (1829-1914), the departed Bishop of Fayum, Egypt, and "Friend of

had a compelling desire to have stuffed pigeon (it is a delicacy food in Egypt). He asked his servant to prepare it. When it was cooked, he told his servant to leave it before him. Whenever his servant would ask him if he wanted it, he would say, "No, leave it." After a few days, it started to rot. There were no fridges in those days. Then he told his servant to bring it. Of course, it smelled awful. He looked at it and said to himself, "This is what your heart desires Abraam. Go ahead and eat of it." See if we are going to train, train ourselves even in the sense of smell.

How then can I have the proper use of the sense of smell? If, for example, I smell a nice fragrance or a nice smell, I need to convert it into a spiritual matter. For example, I need to think about the beautiful example of St Mary Magdalene who anointed the Lord with the sweet-smelling ointment and how the whole house was filled with the fragrance of the oil. If this smell entices lust and fault in my mind, I need to recite with Isaiah the prophet and say, "Instead of a sweet smell there will be a stench..." (Isaiah 3:24) *through myself actually*, in order that I know these things will end. That these things can turn and become nasty, rather than helpful.

The Discipline of Touch

The sense of touch played a very important role in the original sin. When Satan describes himself as a serpent and came to our mother Eve to tempt her, he asked her about God's commandment regarding the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. She answered the serpent and said, "God told

the Poor," is a well-known modern-day Coptic Orthodox saint. William Hanna, *Saint (Anba) Abraam: The Departed Bishop of Fayoum*, (Createspace Independent Pub, 2008).

us, 'you shall not eat it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die'" (Genesis 3:3). Eve must have touched the forbidden fruit, out of curiosity, and when she felt that it was so good, and irresistible, she picked it and ate from it. We are all aware of the sense of touch that it can lead to unhealthy emotions in body and mind. For example, sexual or erotic touches can be an unhealthy feeling to a person. A person needs to be careful with how they deal with themselves and with others when it regards the sense of touch.

There is a story in the paradise of the fathers about a young monk who was visited by his mother. After the visit was over, he wanted to take his mother back to the edge of the village so that way she can go back home. While they were going there, they needed to cross a shallow river, and out of courtesy carried his mother across this river. Before doing so, he wrapped his mother in a blanket. His mother was amazed and surprised and she told him, "I am your mother." The monk replied to her, "I am not afraid to touch your flesh mother but touching you will bring to my memory other flesh that I had touched in my foolish days."⁶⁶ He does not want to remind himself about the wrong that he has committed with the sense of touch.

Touching our bodies in the wrong way can produce certain stimulation that is unchaste and unholy, and many people suffer from it. We need to be careful how we use the sense of touch. Even in our social interactions with one another, we need to be careful with the sense of touch. That I should

⁶⁶ Wallis Budge, *The Paradise of the Holy Fathers* Vol.2, (Australia: St. Shenouda Coptic Orthodox Monastery, 2009), 102.

not use it indiscriminately, especially with members of the opposite sex. I know many people might think, “I do not mean anything wrong by it. I do not feel anything improper from it.” Yes, that might be the case but what about the other person? What are they thinking? What are they feeling? If I stir in him or in her an improper sense, sensations or thought, then I will have to answer for the wrong that I have put them in. What I am talking about here is moderation. This is the key word. St Clement of Alexandria says that Christians are to be children of will, not of desire.⁶⁷

Let me conclude and sum up for you all these with a beautiful word from St Paul who says, “But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil” (Hebrews, 5:14). Imagine that you need to have your senses exercised and that this is done by what we have already discussed. Make sure that you are so cautious that no matter what sense it is that you are using, or if it has been attacked, that you turn it into something godly, having discernment from what is called evil.

⁶⁷ “Our general argument concerning marriage, food, and other matters, may proceed to show that we should do nothing ‘- from desire. Our will is to be directed only towards that which is necessary. For we are children not of desire but of will. A man who marries for the sake of begetting children must practise continence so that it is not desire he feels for his wife, whom he ought to love, and that he may beget children with a chaste and controlled will. For we have learnt not to ‘have thought for the flesh to fulfil its desires.’ We are to ‘walk honourably as in the way’, that is in Christ and in the enlightened conduct of the Lord’s way, ‘not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and lasciviousness, not in strife and envy.’ “Clement of Alexandria, ‘On Marriage’ Stromata Book III” in *Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 2*, eds., James Alexander Roberts, Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885.)

Q&A: *What is the relationship between practising self-control or expecting it and receiving it?*

It is a gift of the Spirit. We have them because we are all created in the image of God. That is what it means to be created in the image of God. It is not about divinity, it is about the different characteristics of God, that He has allowed us to share in Him. Therefore, I need to live by the Spirit in order to have this gift, first and foremost, but also any gift that is not exercised will be lost. In other words, I am given theory to put into practice. I cannot take one angle of it and not the practising angle, because any gift or any talent that is not practised, will be lost. Can you have any talent that you do not practice, and are still able to keep? No. You practice it. More practice makes you more perfect in that talent or that gift, and so forth, and it is a continuous cycle.

Q&A: *How do I practice self-control with my phone or computer?*

If I do not need to use it, then I do not need to access it or use it at certain periods of the year or of the day. I need to say, "No, I am not going to look at it. I am not going to use it." None of us can be without it, but we have allowed it to become such an integral part of our lives that we are now unable to leave it for an hour or two.

I remember on a camp one time; I was sitting with the Year 11 group. It was about 15 of them. I said, "Who can do away with their mobiles for the weekend?" I had no takers. No one wanted to. I said, "Who is willing to give it up for one day?"

No takers. I said, "Five hours?" No takers. I bent down to one hour, and I had two people that were willing to give it up for an hour. That is how much it has become a part of our life. And, we do not want to draw the line and say, "Is this controlling me or am I the one who is meant to be in control?" Remember the Lord said to Adam and Eve, "Have dominion over the earth and subdue it" (Genesis 1:28). We have turned the equation the other way around. Now, we are being dominated, and we have been subdued. Is that not the reality of the matter? Try to practice even just leaving your phone for a few hours a day. It is not going to be the end of the world. Try to put it away during the liturgy or during the church services. Sometimes we cannot even do that...

“A pornographic thought comes to me which troubles me and does not leave me free; but not being able to lead me to act, it simply stops me progressing in virtue; but a vigilant man would cut it off and get up to pray.”

Abba Theodore of Scetis⁶⁸

8.3

The Discipline of the Memory and Imagination

God endowed us with the ability to store information in our memory and to retrieve this information whenever we want at will. God gave us a memory in order to remember his own commandments. This is why we are told in the book of Numbers, “Remember to obey all my commands and will be consecrated to your God” (Numbers 15:40). We have been given this ability to memorise things in order to observe his commands. Through memory, the disciples remembered the words of the lord Jesus Christ himself when he was with him here on earth. They later wrote all these for us in the gospels and epistles. The gospels were recorded in the memory of these believers as an oral tradition much earlier than the written tradition. That is how we received scripture. It is from the memory of what these apostles had of the lord and what he taught.

⁶⁸ John Wortley, *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, (St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2014), 124.

Another reason why we are given a memory is to remember all the good things that the lord has done for us. In this, we are reminded by Moses when he said to the people, “Remember this day in which you went out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage; for by strength of hand the Lord brought you out of this place” (Exodus 13:3).

Imagination on the other hand is something different. Imagination was not actually a gift from God. Theophan the Recluse tells us that the rational creatures, as in angels and humans, were created by God without an imagination. However, Satan’s fall from grace started when he developed an imagination and he envisioned that he would be equal to God or better than God. Remember he wanted to elevate his throne above that of God. He wanted to equate himself to God. Satan, then, was the one who introduced imagination into the minds of Adam and Eve. We see this when he told them that if they ate from the forbidden fruit they would become like God. He put into their minds imagine you can be like God (Genesis 3:5).

Moreover, Satan can use both imagination and memory to tempt us. To tempt us to sin or to tempt us to do wrong. Any object that we perceive by our senses leaves an impression in our memory that can be recalled for good and bad. We all know this that we can recall things that we have seen, heard, or touched and so forth. These things can be good things and sometimes can be bad things.

Sins of the memory and imagination are more dangerous than sins of the senses for several reasons. The sins of the senses are brought to us by encountering an object that

stimulates that sense. When you have seen someone, touched something, heard a sound, smelled something, it stays with your senses. They are more dangerous than the sins of the senses because it also means that the sins of the senses are brought to us by external objects which are the things that the senses meet. Whereas, through memory, you can instantly call these same sensations by imagination, and even worse, take them even to a different level. What I am saying is that sometimes senses can go to sleep, they can rest. But sins of the memory and imagination can attack us even while we sleep through dreams for example. What you think about during the day can manifest itself into dreams during the night. Let us then take a closer look at what the sins of the memory are.

Just as a general thing, always remember what we pray in the liturgy: “cleanse us from the remembrance of evil entailing death.” This is what we are praying for here. That God will heal us from the sins of the memory. Remembrance of evil means that I can remember either an evil that I did in my earlier days, in the past or some evil that is done by another person towards me. These things we pray and say, “to forgive us from the remembrance of evil entailing death.” Among the sins of the memory is sexual immorality. The memory of sins committed in the past can come back to haunt me even after I have stopped doing them. So, how then can I treat this?

Some of the great saints of the desert also suffered from this for many long years. But they were persistent in that they kept fighting these thoughts till they found victory over them. For example, we hear about Abba Moses the Strong who was

tormented by these thoughts about his past evils for a very long time.⁶⁹ We hear about another saint whose name was Mother (Amma) Sarah, a contemporary to Abba Macarius the Great. That she fought against these thoughts for 13 years, fighting against the thoughts of sexual immorality before the lord granted her freedom from these assaults.⁷⁰ You and I know that sexually immoral images or movies that you might have seen on purpose or by accident on tv or on the net, are imprinted into our memory. They can usually come back to haunt us and to offend us in a very violent way. That is why it is important for us to make sure that we do not allow anything to enter the memory on purpose or by chance, so that way we

⁶⁹ The first saying regarding Abba Moses in the Bustan, is: "It happened that Abba Moses of Petra was struggling with the temptation of *porneia*. Unable to stay any longer in the cell, he went and told Abba Isidore. The old man exhorted him to return to his cell. But he refused, saying, 'Abba, I cannot.' Then Abba Isidore took Moses out onto the terrace and said to him, 'Look towards the west.' He looked and saw hordes of demons flying about and making a noise before launching an attack. Then Abba Isidore said to him, 'Look towards the east.' He turned and saw an innumerable multitude of holy angels shining with glory. Abba Isidore said, 'See, these are sent by the Lord to the saints to bring them help, while those in the west fight against them. Those who are with us are more in number than they are.' Then Abba Moses, gave thanks to God, plucked up courage and returned to his cell." John Wortley, *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2014), 193-194.

⁷⁰ Two sayings regarding Amma Sarah says: "It was related of Amma Sarah that for thirteen years she waged warfare against the demon of fornication. She never prayed that the warfare should cease but she said, 'O God, give me strength.'" And "Once the same spirit of fornication attacked her more insistently, reminding her of the vanities of the world. But she gave herself up to the fear of God and to asceticism and went up onto her little terrace to pray. Then the spirit of fornication appeared corporally to her and said, 'Sarah, you have overcome me.' But she said, 'It is not I who have overcome you, but my master, Christ.'" See, John Wortley, *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2014), 300-301.

do not have to suffer the consequences later. Persistence will give us victory over this sin.

Also, among the sins of the memory is, 'the sin of anger'. Imagine that I had an argument or a fight with someone and later have reconciled, the memory of it remains. And that can excite thoughts of anger and revenge within me. It can be quite distressing, and it can hinder my spiritual perfection. The devil can make things look and sound much worse than they really are or were. For example, married couples can end up living in a lot of difficulty because of this issue. If they have a little argument in the morning before going out to work, the devil will take this little argument and work with both of their memories throughout the whole day with it. While at work the devil might cause the incident to be recalled in both their minds, and passionate feelings start to become angry with indignation. The mind starts to wander, and the little argument that was in the morning can become a huge fight when they come home at the end of the day. That is how a lot of our problems in our homes first start, because of these little arguments or these little disagreements, particularly if we let them linger on. Some people even remember things that are deep in their memory that can be lasting for tens of years.

How many times have we heard people say that the wife might remind the husband of something that he did 10 years ago or something that he did not do 10 years ago? Or maybe the husband might remind her of something her mother said 10 or 15 years ago? When you think about it, we can laugh at it, but sometimes these issues can flare up and become huge issues. I have had people in my years working on the

Clerical Council⁷¹ say, “Yes, but you said such and such on our honeymoon.” And they have been married for 20 years! How can anyone remember what they said specifically 20 years into the past is beyond my belief. How beautiful would it be if you and I were free from this sin of anger?

St John Climacus says: “The beginning of freedom from anger is to keep the lips silent when the heart is stirred, the next, to keep thoughts silent when the soul is upset; the last, to be totally calm when unclean winds are blowing.”⁷² Silence of lips, silence of thoughts and then the result is a serene calm. That is the best practice in order to get rid of anger. Try to be silent with your lips and then with your thoughts and see what serene calmness will come your way. Even though there might be a lot of turbulence around you, but there will be a serene calm within you.

Another sin from the sins of memory is ‘judging’. You might have for example witnessed or heard something done by another person and you immediately judge that person for what they have done. You might have repented and confessed about judging that person, but the matter might not be closed or finished at this stage. Every time you see that person, your memory starts to play havoc with you, and you start to judge that person once again in your mind. It is quite possible, that person that has done wrong, may have repented, and confessed about this as well. They might have even forgotten what they have done, which is a part of our confession. Once

⁷¹ The Clerical Council is a panel of Coptic priests who consider the marital affairs of the Coptic community.

⁷² Archimandrite Lazarus Moore, *John Climacus: The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, (Boston: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 2001), 81.

we have confessed and repented about something we should try to forget about this issue. Just on a little side note, do not ever underestimate God's forgiveness to you in repentance. You also need to forgive yourself when God has forgiven you through your repentance. Sometimes I feel that God grants us forgiveness, but we are the ones that do not forgive ourselves. We are almost stuck in this position where God wants to forgive and has forgiven, but we are still holding on. Even if the other person has forgotten about what they have done towards you, yet you keep falling into the sin of judgment about him or her because of the remembrance of this evil. We need to be very careful about this sin of judgment, particularly of others. Again, St John Climacus says "Fire and water do not mix. Neither can you mix judgment of others with the desire to repent."⁷³

One more sin of the memory is the 'sin of vainglory'. Sometimes we might do something that might seem good to us. For example, I might have helped to reconcile two people together and then later I keep recalling about what wise words I have said to them. I start to bask in this glory telling myself how great a job I have done with these two people. Or another example might be a Sunday school teacher who has been given a certain grace in giving a listen to his or her class, because grace is given to the person who speaks for the sake of those who are listening, not because of the excellence of the teacher, but the person who has given that great talk might recall the wise words that they have used and how eloquent they were in their words. Then their heart starts to become filled with

⁷³ "Step 10, On Slander or Calumny". Archimandrite Lazarus Moore, *John Climacus: The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, (Boston: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 2001), 90.

self-gratification, as if the words were coming from the self and not from God.

If we compare this with scripture, we find that it is far from how we should be thinking. Our fathers, the Apostles, and the Disciples, when they were filled with the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, began to speak with other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance (Acts 2). It was the Holy spirit himself who gave them utterance. The Holy Spirit is the one who gives words to preach. It is not the servant, it is not the minister, it is not the priest, nor whoever is actually teaching, it is the words of the Holy Spirit that are given to that person because God imparts grace to the listeners. I am always amazed when I look at the example of St Paul who would humbly and prayerfully say, “and for me, that utterance may be given to me, that I may open my mouth boldly to make known the mystery of the gospel” (Ephesians 6:19). He is asking for utterance to be given to him when he opens his mouth. It is not his own words; it is the words of the lord Jesus Christ. The words of the Holy Spirit. St John Climacus says, “If you want to be glorified, despise glory.”⁷⁴ Vainglory will lead to a whole lot of problems. Let me share with you how we can exercise ourselves to fight against this temptation.

Forgive me for this analogy, it is a difficult one, but I take it upon myself more so than anything else. As soon as a memory of doing good, such as a great sermon, presenting a great topic, or a great lesson, comes into your mind, remember that the

⁷⁴ Step 22, On the many forms of vain glory”. Archimandrite Lazarus Moore, *John Climacus: The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, (Boston: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 2001), 132-145.

lord used a donkey to rebuke the prophet Balaam (Numbers 22 & 1 Peter 2:16). I tell myself I have no more a right to glory in my words than the donkey with Balaam. Was the donkey proud of what he did? He did what he was directed to do. Pass the message on to the prophet Balaam and that is it.

Let us have a look now at the sins of imagination which can be worse. Again, one of those sins of the imagination can be sexual immorality, which we spoke about as a sin of memory as well. I will give you an example of this.

Suppose that I work with a person of the opposite sex that I like or that I fancy. The person might be decent in the way they deal with me. He or she might not flirt with me or deal with me in an inappropriate way, yet in my own bad imagination I can commit a whole spectrum of wrong things sexually in my mind with them. I might think of them in a rude way. I think of them in a sexually explicit way and so forth, even though that person might be modest in the way they dress. But in my imagination, I might parade them in certain ways that are totally despicable and totally unacceptable. That is why it is important for us that to be careful that we never think this way. I think that a lot of times sexual harassment particularly in the workplace happens because people's imaginations are not under control. Then the imagination builds up and starts attacking the person until they react to the imagination that they have been living for. Or we might even dwell on the sexual fantasies that other people might be going through. For example, how many times, particularly in some communities like our community, if we see a young man and a young woman talking together, then instantly we might think that there must be something

going on between them. It is almost as if we have become programmed to think in this way. If I see for example an older gentleman with a younger woman, I might think, "I wonder what is going on here." Whereas for all I know she might be his daughter. It is a dangerous thing to allow the imagination to run wild particularly when it comes to sexual matters.

Again, one of the sins of imagination is 'anger'. For example, if I have a boss at work who might be putting me down or I have a person who is bullying me at school or bothering me in any way, and I cannot do anything about it, in reality, we will want to take revenge, but we cannot. So, I take revenge on that person in my own imagination. I imagine to myself that I am verbally abusing this person and even beating them into a pulp, or even imagining how a vicious accident might happen to that person. Sometimes I might wish the person would be in a car accident or hit a tree or fall out of a tall building, and I am trying to take out my anger on them in my imagination. What we do not realise is that I am committing murder in my own imagination. Compare this with what St John the Beloved says, "In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest. Whoever does not practice righteousness is not from God nor is he who does not love his brother" (1 John 3:10). And again, "We know that we have passed from death to life because we love the brethren, he who does not love his brother abides in death" (1 John 3:14). Also, "Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him" (1 John 3:15). That is a world of difference! We must love not hate others. St John Climacus says, "He who loves the lord has first loved his

brother. Because the second is proof of the first.”⁷⁵ Without me loving my brother even in my own imagination, I cannot profess to say that I love God, because my love for my fellow brother or others is a proof of my love to God. If that does not exist, then my love for God does not exist. The Bible says, “Be angry and do not sin” (Ephesians 4:26). In other words, the Bible has given us a bit of room to move with Him. It is that we should not allow this anger to be transferred into sinfulness by judging, hating, or despising etc. If you want to avoid that anger being transferred into hatred, then probably it is better to avoid the anger. Is that not safer? If I know that stage one is going to lead to stage two, then avoiding stage one is a safer position. Even if I do end up being in an angry state, be careful that this does not become a sin after that. Avoid anger as much as you can because anger, I believe, will not just hurt the other person, but much of the time, the other person does not entirely know what it is exactly that you are angry about. It hurts the person who is angry.

If I disapprove of what someone else is doing whether it is right or wrong, we sometimes imagine ourselves maybe giving that person a good lesson or a good sermon. So, that way you know I am judging that person. I can almost imagine in my own mind what words I can use to deliver to that person to make them know that what they think is wrong or what they teach is wrong. I can even be ready and equipped with verses from the Bible, to show this person that God will judge them for what they are doing. This is quite a dangerous thing.

⁷⁵ “Step 30, Concerning the linking together of the supreme trinity among the virtues”. Archimandrite Lazarus Moore, *John Climacus: The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, (Boston: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 2001), 225-229.

I am judging them in my own imagination. By the way, this could be a weapon used by Satan when we even do our own spiritual practices. As an example, whenever I am reading scripture how many times have we thought, "Yes, I can use this verse to reply to that person who comes and says to me this or that." It is a weapon that is used by Satan. Rather than taking scripture for my own benefit and for my own growth, I am taking scripture to be able to attack others with. I end up in more judgment. But when I do this, I do not actually realise that I am committing the grave sin of judging others in my own imagination and that God's judgment against me personally for doing that will probably far exceed God's judgment of that person for what they have done. All this is in my imagination and these thoughts can become thoughts of arrogance or presumptuous sins that I indulge in teaching that person a lesson in my own imagination through my own words.

The sin of vainglory is also a sin of the imagination as well. The devil sometimes can excite in my own imagination visions about self-righteousness to think, "I am better than others." I can indulge in imagining myself as a famous person who can save so many thousands of souls because of the words of wisdom that I have or the righteous life that I have. I can even imagine myself as a monk or a nun exceeding all the others in ascetic worship or for the way they love God or their way deal with God and so forth. I love the priest (Fr Athanasius Iskandar) who wrote the book that we are basing this series on *Practical Spirituality*, that he himself recounts a story of when he was 12 years old. He often had fantasies of being a martyr, and that he would endure all these horrible tortures more so than many other saints because this was what was

going on in his own imagination. He says, "I revealed in my imaginary steadfastness in face of all the diabolic tortures that were inflicted upon my holy and righteous self."⁷⁶ But how do we compare this say with the fathers of the desert? When a monk asked Abba Antony the Great, what must I do to be saved? The elder answered him and said, "Do not trust in your own righteousness. Do not worry about what has passed and constrain your tongue and your stomach."⁷⁷ That is what gives salvation, but first he said to him "do not trust in your own righteousness." Who am I? What is my righteousness compared to the righteousness of the Lord or the righteousness of the saints?

Whenever we are fought with a sense of righteousness or we feel we have done something that is worthwhile we can think of the words of Pope Shenouda III (1923 – 2012) of blessed memory who said, "Remind yourselves of two things. Remind yourselves of your sins because that quickly brings a person back to the level of humility." Then he says, "compare yourself with the saints."⁷⁸ So, if I think of it, I have achieved something that is worthwhile and then I compare myself with Abba Anthony, Abba Paul, or St Mary or one of these beautiful fathers and mothers. What have I accomplished compared to these great saints?

⁷⁶ Fr Athanasius Iskander, *Practical Spirituality according to the Desert Fathers*, (Australia: St. Shenouda Monastery Press, 2008), 51.

⁷⁷ Abba Pambo asked this question to Abba Antony. See, John Wortley, *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2014), 32.

⁷⁸ "Contrition and Humility". Pope Shenouda III, *The Life of Repentance and Purity*, trans., Bishop Suriel, (Australia: St Athanasius College Press; USA: St Vladimir's Seminary Press), 241-244.

Among the sins of imagination is the sin of daydreaming. No one is free from daydreaming, that is impossible. But to indulge in excessive daydreaming is a sin that we need to confess about. The reality of the matter is that daydreaming is useless. It is a waste of time. We waste valuable time that can be spent in many other things whether by prayer, study, reading the Bible, family matters etc. How many times as a student, do we would go to our desk to sit down and study, and we would be in the motion of opening our books and sharpening the pencil, getting everything set up and ready to immediately go into the “bittersweet fantasies” of something else? And we daydream ... we drift. One very real danger is that these daydreams can often start as innocent fantasies but can also end up being horrible immoral fantasies. For example, how many people fantasise about their wedding and the day that it is going to be and all that can lead into even other sexual fantasies later? It is scary when you think about it. Daydreaming can start of innocently then it can be changed into something that could be quite detrimental.

St James just outright tells us very clearly that a person who loves the world is an enemy of God (James 4:4). Despite this we often indulge in this sin by imagining ourselves to be living in great palaces or to be wearing the latest designer clothes or driving one of those dream cars etc. Can you imagine that cars occupy a big space in the minds of our pre-teen children? They can talk about it for hours. They can tell you minute details about a car that you would get so bored, you just say to them, “please stop, this is nonsense”. They paste the pictures of these cars on their walls in their bedrooms, they dream about them day and night. So, we need to be careful about these things of the world.

St Isaac the Syrian says, "Close your eyes to the precious things of the world that you may deserve to have the peace of God reign in your heart."⁷⁹ It is only when I do not look at these things of the world that I will start to feel the presence of God in my heart. And this temptation by the way, was one of the three temptations that the devil used against our lord Jesus Christ. When he took Him to the high mountain and he showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory, and said, "All these things I will give you if you will fall down and worship me" (Matthew 4). This is Satan talking to the lord Jesus Christ. Of course, the lord rebuked Satan, and the devil will continue trying this same trick time after time, even with us. He will show you and promise worldly things only if you fall and worship him. Yes, it is true. He might give you these things, but he will take so much more in compensation. He will take your spirituality; he will take your peacefulness of heart. He will take your calmness of mind. He will take so many things because he has given you very little. So, every time we indulge in these fantasies, we are consenting to Satan and submitting to Satan.

This is especially dangerous when we are fasting. Imagine two weeks before lent when I should be on a spiritually high level, in preparation for Holy Week, and I am probably thinking about the feast that will happen after midnight mass. It happens to all of us. The sumptuous dinner that will be held after the midnight liturgy or even on Sunday morning in the liturgy when the aroma of the food overrides the aroma of incense within the church. And instead, the food that emits this aroma becomes my contemplation. In my fantasy, it

⁷⁹ St Isaac of Ninevah, *On Ascetical Life*, trans., Mary Jansbury (USA: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1989), 55.

becomes my obsession. Therefore, I am in the presence of the Lord in the community of the faithful and yet my mind is wondering about something else. You can almost feel the food in your mouth because you are dwelling on it so much, to the extent that the smell is in your nostrils and your mouth starts to salivate over what you are smelling and what you are thinking of. Even when you are not fasting, and you suddenly start to imagine that you have got this juicy mouth-watering hamburger or this amazing ice cream or whatever it is that makes your mouth salivate. Then we start to daydream about this and end up fantasizing about this food.

I wonder whether this is gluttony in my imagination. Gluttony is a sin even if it is in my imagination. This happened with the people of the Old Testament. The Israelites struggled with this sin after they left the land of Egypt. They told Moses “We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost, and the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. Now we have lost our appetite, we never see anything but this manna. A manner that used to come down from heaven” (Exodus 16; Numbers 11). God wanted to satisfy these people, so God sent these people quails, but he also punished them severely for their gluttony. The book of Numbers tells us that, while the meat of the quails was still between their teeth and before it could be consumed, the anger of the Lord burned against the people and he struck them with a severe plague. Here, moderation is the key word. If I allow myself to fantasise about food, then this is gluttony of the imagination and it is a sin that needs to be confessed and repented from.

Then, what is the treatment for all these sins? The first step is that I need to recognise the nature of these fantasies, that

they are sins. They are not harmless thoughts or just fantasies. A little thought now can end up becoming a fantasy that I may not get rid of ever again. As such, I ought then to mention them in my repentance and in my confession. Just like any other sin that I am fighting against, I need to pray about this so that God will give me grace to be able to overcome these. Pray and remind yourself of what Cyprian of Carthage said: "If he who is without sin prayed, how much more ought sinners pray."⁸⁰ Even, the Lord Himself who is sinless prayed how much more does a sinner need to pray! Whether it be sins of memory or imagination, remember the saying of St Augustine who said, "When tempted to plunge into sin, say to yourself, 'fool! Do you not know that you are carrying God in you!'"⁸¹ Imagine if you rebuke yourself like that as you are about to commit a sin, whether it is by imagination, memory etc. Say, "fool! Do you not know that you are carrying God around in you!" I wonder if I am able to reach the stage where I can say with David the prophet that "the Lord is before me. He is at my right hand; I shall not be moved" (Psalm 16:8). Imagine if that you are physically feeling that the Lord is present with you. He is leading your journey and he is at your right hand. That way, whenever you are about to commit a wrong that he is physically there with you limiting the way you think, so that you can transform the thought into thoughts of Christ. Bring every thought into the captivity of Christ, as scripture tells us (2 Corinthians 10:4-5).

⁸⁰ Alistair Stewart-Skyes, trans., Tertulian, Cyprian, Origen: On The Lord's Prayer, (USA: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004), 86-87.

⁸¹ "Sermon 162, On the words of the Apostle, 1 Corinthians 6:18, Every sin whatever that a man commits is outside the body; but the one who fornicates sins against his own body." Edmund Hill, and John E. Rotelle, eds., *The Works of Saint Augustine: v. 1. Sermons on the Old Testament, 20-50*, (USA: New City Press, 1992), 145-151

“The desire for possessions is dangerous and terrible, knowing no satiety; it drives the soul which it controls to the heights of evil. Therefore, let us drive it away vigorously from the beginning. For once it has become master it cannot be overcome.”

*Abba Isidore of Pelusia*⁸²

8.4

Presumptuous Sins

I want to share with you a beautiful verse from Psalm 19. David the prophet prays, “Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins. Let them not have dominion over me then I shall be blameless, and I shall be innocent of great transgression” (Psalm 19:13). So, what are these presumptuous sins? They are the hidden sins.

There are sins that can be veiled with an outward righteousness, so they are not perceived as sins. There can also be actual virtues that the person has and practices, but it could be in a way that is not pleasing to God or is not according to God's will. Sometimes these sins are called ‘right-hand sins.’ This terminology is used by the fathers because they are sins

⁸² John Wortley, *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2014), 146.

that are masqueraded as virtues. They might look as virtuous, but they may not be from God. Let us have a look at some of these presumptuous sins.

Self-reliance

This seems a bit strange because we are living in a world where you are taught to rely on yourself and push yourself to be able to do everything on your own. However, what do I mean by self-reliance? You might hear a sermon, for example, and you might feel that it gives peace to your heart. You might desire on the inside to grow in this life of righteousness, but it must be done in a proper way. You might become very zealous, you might start to fast a lot, you might start to pray a lot, and you may even start to read your Bible a lot. You feel this great energy that is within you that could be mistaken for your own work rather than the grace of God. That could be quite dangerous, because if we are doing something from our own being then it could be for self-glory. The only safe way to really guard this is to work with your confession father. Ask him to guide you along what you are doing with regards to your spiritual program. If you do not want it to be an issue of self-reliance, the solution is that you discuss this with your confession father. Most likely your confession father will give you a modest program for readings, prayers and fasting.

However, I want you to understand something very important, that in orthodoxy we do not believe in shooting up the ladder all at once. We believe that this is a slow process, but surely, a safe one. It is better to get there on a slow scale and get there safely, rather than make a big jump and then find

that you are back to square one or even worse, total neglect. I want you to understand that a regular, consistent, and modest program can be far better than these bouts of temporary spirituality. Consistency makes a huge difference, and it is likened to what one of the fathers said: said, "If you look at the waves crashing against the rock on a sea front that rock with time diminishes. Because there is a consistency of that wave hitting against it. If it just hits just the ones, it will have no effect on the rock."⁸³

It is the same with our spiritual life. Consistency and spirituality can move the heart to become much softer, a heart that loves God and wants to continue to live with God. The problem is that even if you do it in a right way, and you go to your father of confession, the devil might start to convince you that you need to do more than your father of confession asks you to do. Like this, we are going into another sort of sin, which is the sin of over-righteousness. Can you believe that? You can be over-righteous. The devil might tell you something like, "Abuna does not really know your spiritual depth. He does not really understand that you could do much more abundant things. He does not really know that he is delaying your spiritual life with the advice he gave you." The devil might start to fight you in that way. What you might do then is to hide from your confession father some of the spiritual things that you do. Your father of confession might say, "no, you are fasting too long" or "you are praying too much" or "you are reading too much." He might curb you back because he does not want you to get to that over-righteous level.

⁸³ St John Chrysostom said this. See, Robert C. Hill, trans., *Saint John Chrysostom: Homilies on Genesis 18–45*, (USA: Catholic University of America Press, 1986), 87.

Once you do this, the devil will negatively help you in your ascetic endeavour. He will make you feel good about what you are doing, because now you can see that you are fasting for longer hours, you are reading your Bible excessively to the extent that it might be taking other valuable time that is important in your life. You are praying so much more than before, and so forth. Why would the devil do that? I think the devil does that in order to make your ascetic endeavour the goal in and of itself rather than a means to spiritual perfection. Rather than God being the aim, the spiritual endeavour itself becomes the aim and you become a master at fasting or praying or reading the Bible. At the end of it all you might question, "What are these practices doing to strengthen my relationship between me and God? Is it really getting me close to God or is it just that I have become so proficient at it, that it has become the goal itself?" Be careful then that you are not over-righteous. Solomon the Wise in the book of Ecclesiastes says, "Do not be overly righteous nor overly wise. Why should you destroy yourself?" (Ecclesiastes 7:16). We are also told by St Paul the Apostle in his letter to the Romans, "For I say through the grace given to me to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think. But to think soberly as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith" (Romans 12:13). So, I should not think of myself above what is the normal level. To think soberly means to think wisely – to think as if one is sober not as one who is drunk. The devil even used this trick with Abba Antony the Great. When Abba Antony the Great finished his prayers and gave himself some rest, the devil used to come to him and say, "Antony wake up and pray. Is it a bad thing?" The devil is asking Antony to

wake up and pray. But the wise saint would reply and say, “I pray when I want to, I will never listen to you.”⁸⁴ Even if it is good advice but coming from Satan then it is not good advice at all. I suppose what I am saying is that one must be moderate in everything that they do, even in their spiritual life.

That is why this moderation is called by the fathers the royal way. The royal way meaning that it does not go to the *right*, which is over-righteous, or it does not go to the *left*, which is sinfulness. It is a middle road. I used to love the saying of the late Pope Shenouda III when he used to say, “The middle road has saved many.”⁸⁵ Rather than being over-righteous or living in sin, do things properly and do things in a moderate way and this is actually the best. We find this central theme in the stories and the writings of the desert fathers. They give us a beautiful example of how they were able to overcome these issues. Each one of them had a rule for prayer, fasting and readings assigned to them by their spiritual guide. For us in our world today, I should always consult with my confession father about my spiritual endeavours and ask him to assign me a rule for my spiritual work, and I should not actually divert away from that. Even if I have fulfilled all righteousness, I have to remind myself of what the Lord says in Scripture, “So

⁸⁴ Tim Vivian and Apostolos Athanassakis, trans., *Athanasius of Alexandria. The Life of Anthony: The Coptic Life and the Greek Life*, (Cistercian Publications, 2003).

⁸⁵ “Acting slowly is not always to be associated with a gentle or peaceable nature. It may sometimes be related to negligence, indifference, or stupidity. Be wise, then, in how you behave, and do not follow either extremes. Taking the middle course has saved many people, and the best way, as they say, is often an intermediate position between two opposite extremes, between overdoing it and underdoing it...” Pope Shenouda III, *So Many Years with the Problems of People Part 3: Spiritual and General Problems*, trans., Glynis Younan, (dār āl-tibā’ah āl-qawmiyah, 1997), 81.

likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do'" (Luke 17:10).

Even if I fulfill all righteousness, I need to say to myself, "I am an unprofitable servant." Abba Macarius the Great sums it up for us in a nice way. He says, "This is the mark of Christianity, however much a man toils and however many righteousness he performs to feel that he has done nothing. And in fasting to say this is not fasting and in praying to say this is not praying. And in perseverance of prayer he says I have shown no perseverance, I am only just beginning to practice and to take pain in persevering. And even if he is righteous before God, he should say I am not righteous. I do not take pains but only make a beginning every day."⁸⁶ If I am good at fasting, I should say, "this is not fasting compared to the great saints who used to fast for two weeks at a time." How does my fast compare with the fast of the great desert fathers? When they wanted to break their fast, they would boil a few lentils to eat or take some grass or herbs from the field and eat that. In other words, I should put myself back into the proper level and that way Satan does not fight me.

Punishing Ourselves

It is like DIY (Do It Yourself) projects. It is very common. This sin of punishing ourselves or others is sort of similar, but instead if you put an "S" on the end, it becomes DIYS (Do

⁸⁶ "Homily 26, Concerning the worth and value, the power and efficiency of the immortal soul, and how it is tempted by Satan and obtains deliverance from the temptations." See, Arthur James Mason, *Fifty Spiritual Homilies of St. Macarius the Egyptian*, (USA: The Macmillan Company, 1921), 185-199.

It Yourself Spirituality). What does that mean? It means that sometimes I can punish myself for the sins that I commit. If I commit wrong-doing, I do more prostrations, more prayers, more fasting and in doing this I think that I am dealing with the problem. But again, without the guidance of the confession father, that could actually lead to room for error, because you end up taking things into your own hands and soon enough, this will lead into another sin which could be absolving yourself or giving yourself excuses. For example, if I am on a trip and the food served on a plane is non-fasting, I can allow myself to break the fast by giving myself excuses such as, "I fast a lot anyway; I deserve a break from fasting; I am travelling anyway." Then I start to absolve myself by taking the power of binding and loosening, which belongs to the priesthood. It is only the priest who is allowed to bind and loose and to say "Yes, this is allowed for you; this is not allowed for you."

With guidance of your spiritual father you do not become master of your own destiny. No, it is somebody else who is helping you become master of your destiny – it is not left up to you. In other words, without guidance from your confession father, you become your own spiritual director and your own spiritual advisor, and you do not take advice from anyone else. The Gospel of Luke says, "No one, when he has lit a lamp, puts it in a secret place or under a basket, but on a lampstand, that those who come in may see the light" (Luke 11:33). The fathers of the desert interpret this to mean that I should never hide my spiritual work from my spiritual advisor. Even if I think that my spiritual father might not understand what I am saying, or it is beyond his comprehension. I must never keep anything secret from my confession father because that gives

room for Satan to work. According to the desert fathers, they tell us, it is very dangerous to hide your asceticism from your confession father.

Delusions of Righteousness

If we continue in this way that we have been speaking about, the devil may convince us that what we are doing is the right thing, to the extent that he will make us think we are on the right track to eternal life. Realistically, what we are practicing could be far from it; it could be making us lose our road to eternal life. That is why Christ warns us, “Therefore take heed that the light which is in you is not darkness” (Luke 11:35). What does Christ mean that *the light is in you it is not darkness*? I can be seeing it as light, but it is darkness that might lead to perdition. In the book of Revelation, the Lord rebukes one of the bishops of the seven churches of Asia Minor and says, “Because you say, ‘I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing’” (Revelation 3:17). It is a beautiful state, is it not? Who of us knows anyone that would not want to be in that state? But then the warning is given, and He says, “and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked.” So, the image that I have got of myself is that I am rich, I have become wealthy and have need of nothing, but the reality is far from it. Theophan the Recluse says that people who reach this stage are often in danger of being totally lost. They are just too caught up in their unrighteous life. Theophan even says that these people only discover their state after they have passed away. It is almost like a wake up.⁸⁷ *What! I was*

⁸⁷ This is a summary of chapters 32 & 33 of E. Kadloubovsky, and G.E.H. Palmer, trans., *Unseen Warfare*, (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1987).

doing all this for my own glory not for God's glory. I was doing this for my own aspirations not for God. It is those people that the Lord said the following, "Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'" (Matthew 7:22-23). These were people that were doing this miraculous work. Yet the Lord says, "Depart from me I do not know you; you have practiced lawlessness."

I need not to care about what others see in me. I should care about what God sees in me. It is better to obey God than men, that is what scripture says (Acts 5:29). Remember that beautiful story about Abba Antony the Great when he asked his disciple to go to the graves, curse these dead people and say every bad word about them. He did and he came back. He says, "Now I want you to go and praise them say every good thing about them." And he did. Abba Antony asked the disciple, "What was the reaction when you said the bad things?" He replied, "Nothing". Abba Antony said, "You be likewise, and you shall be saved." If people praise you, and within yourself you think, *I am the chief of sinners*. If St Paul can say that about himself how much more so that I should say, "I am the worst of sinners, if only people knew what my faults are." If people falsely accuse you or say wrong things about you, say, "Thank you Lord for that blessing." Remember the verse that the Lord said, "Woe to you when all men speak well of you" (Luke 6:26).

False Revelations, Visions, and Dreams

This is a very important part, because the devil tries to confirm the delusion that we might be in by sometimes making us know things before they happen. Yes, he has that ability, to let us think that we know the thoughts of people. How does the devil do this? It is very easy how he does it since he knows certain things and can use it in a very diffuse way. For example, he might trick us into thinking that we know one of our relatives is very sick. Then, when we call home and ask about them, we find that they are very sick. He starts to play with our minds to say, “see look you have got a divine gift here. You can tell things that most other people do not know about.” He builds up this deadly sin of pride and self-righteousness. St John Climacus tells us that the devil can implant a thought in someone's mind and reveal it to another in order to give him the illusion that he can read people's minds.⁸⁸ I wonder where all these psychics get their knowledge from. It could be from the devil; the devil is revealing things to them in order to for him to deceive people.

There is a beautiful story in the desert fathers that says, “Some brothers came to find Abba Antony to tell him about the visions that they were having and to know from Abba Antony whether these visions are true or they are actually something from Satan from the demons.” These brothers went to travel to see St Antony, and along the way. their donkey died. The story goes that when they reach the place where the old man was, he said to them before they could ask him anything at all, “How was it that the little donkey died on the way here?”

⁸⁸ “Step 26, On Discernment of thoughts, passions and virtues.” See, Archimandrite Lazarus Moore, *John Climacus: The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, (Boston: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 2001), 161-197.

And they were surprised. They said, "How did you know about that father?" He told them that, demons showed me what happened. So, they said to Abba Antony, "That was what we came to question you about, for fear we were being deceived for we have visions which often turn out to be true." Therefore, Abba Antony convinced them by the example of the donkey that their visions came from Satan.⁸⁹

You know, some people can have visions of saints and angels, and one must be very careful before accepting these, because the devil can imitate these saints in order to ruin our spiritual life. The history of the desert fathers is full of horror stories of people who accepted these visions without discerning whether they are from God or from the devil. One of these stories is about a monk whose name was Heron. He spent 50 years in ascetic worship and fasting. But he was brought to ruin by a false angel that appeared to him for a long time. To the extent that this monk, who had been fighting for so long and working so hard, stopped going to Church. He refused the advice of other monks and even rejected talking about this with his Abbot. In the end, this false angel convinced him that he was going to be taken up alive to heaven like Elijah the prophet. The poor man believed this, and he went in order to say goodbye to his fellow monks. They tried of course, in vain, to convince him that this was of the devil, and that he should not listen to this, that he should speak about this with his confession father or the Abbot, but he refused. The angel took him up to a high mountain and convinced him to jump, and of course he fell to his death ... a horrible death. The

⁸⁹ John Wortley, *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2014), 33.

Abbot would not allow the psalms to be chanted over this dead monk, because he considered him as one who had committed suicide. He lost everything because of his belief in these false apparitions.⁹⁰

In another story, an angel appeared to a monk for three years. We are told that this monk's cell would light up from the apparition of this angel and that he would not need to use candles to light up his cell. After three years, this false angel gave him a vision of paradise. What was his vision of paradise? He showed him all the Jews sitting in the bosom of Abraham while all the Christians were being tortured in hades. What an absurd vision! And of course, this monk left Christianity because he thought, "I need to become a Jew in order to be in the bosom of Abraham."⁹¹

However, there were other monks that were wise and very discerning. For example, one monk saw the angel Gabriel. Of course, false angel again, and this "angel Gabriel" appeared with a message from God. But this simple and humble monk told him, "You must have the wrong person because I am sinful. There is no way that apparitions could occur to me. You must be wanting the other monk who is in the next cell – he is a saintly monk." Of course, as soon as this humility was shown to the false angel Gabriel, so-called Gabriel disappeared in smoke.

Another story is about a monk where the devil appeared as the false lord and told him to worship him. This monk in all

⁹⁰ Ramsey Boniface, trans., *John Cassian: The Conferences*, (USA: Paulist Press, 1997), 87-88.

⁹¹ Fr Athanasius Iskander, *Practical Spirituality according to the Desert Fathers*, (Australia: St. Shenouda Monastery Press, 2008), 59.

simplicity said, "I do not want to see the lord on earth I want to see him in heaven." Having said that of course, that false lord disappeared straight away into smoke before this monk. You might think that these are stories that have happened to monks a long time ago, but you know what, the devil is still using the same techniques, even today, with great success sometimes. Father Athanasius Iskander in his book 'Practical Spirituality', tells us some incredible stories that he himself has been through with some people. One of those stories occurs during the time of Pope Kyrillos VI, where Fr Athanasius noticed that one of the servants had stopped coming to church and stopped having communion for a long time. So, he decided to go and visit this servant and to see what the reason for this was. The servant simply told Fr Athanasius, "Pope Kyrillos appears to me every Sunday and gives me Holy Communion." How strange is that? In another story that Father Athanasius Iskander relates that another servant from a different church that he served in told him there was something really weighing heavy on his conscience. Abuna said to him, "Please go see your father of confession", because Fr Athanasius was not his father of confession. The servant did not do that, because the next morning he called Fr Athanasius again and said, "Pope Kyrillos came to me in a dream, asked me to confess to him and then gave me the absolution." This is what the servant saw as a vision. This servant asked Abuna whether this was good enough or not? Abuna said to him, "Now, I still suggest very strongly that you go speak to your confession father tell him about this dream and he will guide you."⁹²

⁹² Fr Athanasius Iskander, *Practical Spirituality according to the Desert Fathers*, (Australia: St. Shenouda Monastery Press, 2008), 60.

You see, there are true apparitions. There is no doubt about it but there are also false apparitions. For instance, in this world there is real money but there is also counterfeit money. It exists, this counterfeit money, and that is what Satan uses to also take us away from our spiritual path. The proper way to handle revelations, apparitions and dreams is again to consult our confession father about these things. Most of the miracles, apparitions or visions that have happened in scripture, most of them are for unbelievers to bring them into the faith. That is why St Paul, when he speaks about the gift of tongues in the early church, says, "Therefore tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers" (1 Corinthians 14:22). Why then, do I as a believer need a miracle? We need to be careful even of spiritual visions, revelations, and dreams. A spiritual person will always deem himself or herself unworthy of these revelations.

Dreams that can come to us are under the control of the devil. He takes all that is in your subconscious and he mixes it up puts it together in a funny way, fishing for information. It could be tens of years apart in order to disturb you. We should not give way to dreams. Abba Antony once said, "He who believes in dreams is the toy of the demons".⁹³

⁹³ Perhaps a saying linked to this: "Some brothers came to find Abba Anthony to tell him about the visions they were having, and to find out from him if they were true or if they came from the demons. They had a donkey which died on the way. When they reached the place where the old man was, he said to them before they could ask him anything, 'How was it that the little donkey died on the way here?' They said, 'How do you know about that, Father?' And he told them, 'The demons shewed me what happened.' So they said, 'That was what we came to question you about, for fear we were being deceived, for we have visions which often turn out to be true.' Thus, the old man convinced them, by the example of the donkey, that their visions came from the demons." John Wortley, *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2014), 33.

False Gifts

I can think that I have spiritual gifts, like healing. If somebody asks me to pray for them and they become well, I may think that I have this gift of healing because it was just through my prayer that this person has become well. But the devil can give somebody a headache and cause it to go away when you pray for them because he wants to deceive or cause a problem for someone and then later solves that problem when you pray for that person to deceive you and to deceive that person. An example of this kind of trickery is given to us in the life of Abba Pachomius, who is known as father of community. It says that there was a monk training with him under Abba Palamon who used to taunt the novice, Pachomius that he was not striving hard enough. This monk taunted him by walking on burning coals without being hurt. Abba Pachomius felt a bit discouraged that he was unable to do this. This monk even came and told Abba Pachomius, "Today I am going to jump into a furnace, and I will not be burnt." He wanted to take these spiritual gifts to a higher level, and he jumped into the furnace and was consumed by the fire instantly. Abba Pachomius was so shaken up by this that he went out into the depth of the desert to pray and said to God, "This is too difficult for me why did all this happen." God sent an angel to comfort Abba Pachomius and to tell him, "Because of your humility this is what kept you safe. God will grant you discernment so that the devil cannot trick you in this way and you will be able to help others who will become your disciples."⁹⁴ This shows us now the clear differences between proper visions and false visions. I wonder where all these so-called "healers" get their

⁹⁴ Armand Veilleux, ed., *Pachomian Koinonia: The life of Saint Pachomius and his disciples*. Vol. 1, (Cistercian Publications, 1980).

gifts from? It could very well be from Satan in order to deceive people. The Bible tells us that the devil can cause illnesses. How many times have we read in scripture about possessed people who were healed by the lord from their blindness, deafness, epilepsy, and other ailments caused by the demons? And, when the demon was removed this person became whole again.

In the book of Job, we are even told that Satan was the one that smote Job with boils from the sole of his foot unto the crown of his head. The Satan that struck Job with these sore boils, is the Satan that can cause someone to be temporarily blind and to allow the healer to heal him. He does this all because he wants the healer and the person healed and all those who are looking on to be deceived by these false miracles. I need to be careful about false gifts or even about false consolation or false comfort that might come. Sometimes the devil in order to confirm to us the delusion that we might be in, gives us false a warmth in our heart about issues. He might even give false tears when you cry, and you feel that you have ascended to the highest of heavens during your prayer, and he does this quite easily. He does this by telling his demons not to disturb you or to tempt you, in order that you may be deceived that you are going in the right track and on the right way. Here is a true example of how he does that. Father Athanasius tells us about this story, that a long time ago he met two people who were living together but not married. They used to tell him, "Abuna, we pray the Agpeya together and we read the bible together. We actually have tears when we stand up in the presence of God to pray." The devil had deceived them the entire time by justifying their life of sin i.e.,

living together out of wedlock, through tears in their prayers to make them feel as though they are not living in sin.⁹⁵ There is an old saying that says, “It cannot be wrong if it feels right” or “If it feels right, then do it.” I think the devil himself must have written these words. Just because something feels right it does not mean that it is good for us.

What about the “calm or peace before the storm”? We are very familiar and heard of this saying. Well, this is another trick that the devil can use in order to ambush us into going into the storm. Father Athanasius relates another beautiful story that is very common. He talks about a young boy and a young girl who are seeing each other behind their parents back. They will not tell even their confession father about it. They will only have confession about whatever sin that is happening in their own private life but not about their relationship. They say, “It is only friendship...”⁹⁶ That is what the devil whispers in their ears. To the extent that they might spend hours upon hours together and they might have no desire to do wrong, nor touch each other or kiss each other. It is because Satan has told his demons not to attack them. They might fall into the trap of false security because they might feel that they have met together for hours before. They might think, “We have seen each other so many times, and there is no issue. We know we were in control.” Then one day, they might be in the same atmosphere together or in the same circumstances together. That is when Satan releases all his attacks upon them. Feelings

⁹⁵ Fr Athanasius Iskander, *Practical Spirituality according to the Desert Fathers*, (Australia: St. Shenouda Monastery Press, 2008), 62.

⁹⁶ Fr Athanasius Iskander, *Practical Spirituality according to the Desert Fathers*, (Australia: St. Shenouda Monastery Press, 2008), 62.

of lust will suddenly start to attack them while they are totally unprepared. Then they fall into sin. What happened to “the peace before the calm”? It was under a false security that they thought “now we are in control we are not going to let Satan trick us.” You see, Satan sometimes withholds his fights until all the environment is working against, then he releases his attacks. Again, I need to be careful about this calmness before the storm. It is no wonder that sometimes the church fathers say that if you are not finding difficulties in your life, be careful, because Satan might be at work in the background, and we do not know when he is going to come up and attack. We do not know what he is up to, but we know that it is not good.

The War of Two Opposites

It is another trick that the devil uses to spiritually exhaust us and to make us his prey. He will plant two opposite thoughts in your mind. They could both be good thoughts, and there is no problem about that, but it becomes a problem when they keep alternating in your mind. He keeps draining you between those two thoughts. Each one has its arguments each one can be supported by verses from the Bible. Each one seems to be well and makes us feel good down the track. We go on trying to find out which one is from God and which one is not. The truth is, and most of the time, that neither are from God. They are both from the devil. He is trying to drain us by making us dwell on that. He does that by engaging our mind in fruitless pursuits in order to weaken us and make us an easy pray for attack. Again, the easiest solution to this dilemma is to talk to our confession father. Sometimes, our confession Father will say, “Do not accept either of those thoughts, just let it be for

a while.” He says in order to give us a bit of a break from this mental exhaustion of thinking about these two opposites or from this war of opposites.

The War in Spiritual Progress

Satan can sometimes make us feel overanxious about our spiritual progress. He might say to us, “You are not making any progress. Change your father of confession. You can be guided by other people much better who might be much wiser, and so forth.” However, what we do not know is that God hides from us the fruit of our strife, even to the last day of our death or last day of our life. The Lord does this out of His love for us. If we see fruits, we might immediately attribute these results to our own holiness or piety and not to His grace and providence in our lives. That is why we can lose all that we have gained from our strife and fall into the sin of pride and self-righteousness if He reveals the fruit to us. Whatever you do, do privately and do not look for results. The results are there, the results are with God. We can see this clearly from so many examples in scripture. When the Lord brought the Israelites into the promised land. He told them something amazing: “And the lord your God will drive out these nations before you little by little. You will be unable to destroy them at once lest the beasts of the field become too numerous for you” (Deuteronomy 7:22). The fathers actually explained this to us by saying that these nations simply symbolise our sins, and that the Lord does not want to destroy our sins quickly lest the beasts of the field that is pride and self-righteousness, increase in us and devour us.

Imagine the Lord, when you have an issue with a sin and He removes it quickly from you, and again another sin is quickly removed, and so forth. After a while, we think, "I am pretty good at this. I have got it all together. Nothing is going to ever hurt me." Then the thoughts of pride and self-righteousness start to occur, which could be worse and more disastrous than the actual little sins that existed in our life. The Lord does not remove all these struggles suddenly. That is why the Lord gave us the parable in the Gospel of Mark, in order that we should not expect to see results of our strife: "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground, and should sleep by night and rise by day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he himself does not know how" (Mark 4:26-28). You plant the seed. Do you know how it grows? Can you see how much it grows overnight? Of course not. But you know that it is going to grow. It is as though you have this houseplant at home, and you know it is growing day by day. But if you try to watch it grow, you are not going to see it grow. Can you see it grow? Of course not, it does not happen. It is the same with our spiritual life. We do not expect to see results because God hides these results from us for our own good. I love this beautiful verse from St Paul: "Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one? I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase" (1 Corinthians 3:5-6). We do what we need to do, and we leave the results with God. We do not need to see physical results in order to know that this is going to bring good.

Secondary Sins

Presumptuous Sins

The fathers tell us that every demon who comes to fight against us or against any faithful person has two assistant demons. They come in a mob and gang up. Every demon has two assistant demons, one on his right and one on his left. The one on his right hand is called the demon of pride and the one on his left is called the demon of despair. Pride and despair are his helpers. If the principal demon succeeds in tempting us into a sin the demon of despair takes over and begins to rebuke us harshly in order to make us despair about our own salvation. The main demon has made us fall into a sin and if he succeeds the demon of despair comes in, takes over and starts to rebuke us very harshly. We may even think that it is our conscience that is rebuking us, or that it is God who is rebuking us because of our repeated failures. This is a mistake because it is not God. According to the Church fathers, if God rebukes, he rebukes in a gentle and loving way that is never harsh. He desires that everybody comes to the truth that everybody may be saved. He says, "...the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out" (John 6:37). God will never rebuke us harshly; it is only Satan that rebukes us harshly.

Now, if we fall into temptation, the assisting demon of despair takes over and continues to make us despair over our salvation. But if we resist the temptation, the demon of pride starts to take over and begins to put thoughts of self-righteousness in our mind by telling us, "You have really become experienced in fighting this sin!" In order to make us lose the victory that we have just attained, leading us to think that it is by our own efforts that we have succeeded, and not by the grace of God. You see, this is the trickery Satan comes to

fight us with. If we win or lose, we are still going to be fought. There is no escape from fighting. Even more so, the demon of despair sometimes implants thoughts of blasphemy in our minds or even thoughts of utter despair and helplessness. He says, "How on earth are you going to confess this to your confession father? Your confession father thinks so highly of you! How are you going to go and say that you have committed this or committed that? Abuna will rebuke you in a very harsh way. Forget about it. Keep it private and do not embarrass yourself." He keeps instilling this despair to the extent that he is certain we are all alone and fighting this without any assistance whatsoever.

A monk one time went to his Abba because he was very distressed of the thoughts of blasphemy that were constantly attacking him. The Abba very wisely said to him, "Ignore these thoughts and say to Satan, these are your thoughts not mine. May your blasphemy be upon your head." When you are fought with this despair, say to yourself, "This is no more than Satan. Away with you Satan! You shall not tempt the Lord your God!" Because he only wants you to despair in order to hinder your repentance and to hinder your road of spiritual perfection.⁹⁷

⁹⁷ This is a saying concerning Abba Poemen: "It was said of a brother that he had to fight against blasphemy and he was ashamed to admit it. He went where he heard some great old men lived to see them, in order to open his heart to them but when he got there, he was ashamed to admit his temptation. So he kept going to see Abba Poemen. The old man saw he was worried, and he was sorry he did not tell him what was wrong. So one day he forestalled him and said, 'For a long time you have been coming here to tell me what is troubling you, and when you are here you will not tell me about it, but each time you go away unhappy, keeping your thoughts to yourself. Now tell me, my child, what it is all about.' He said to him, 'The demon wars against me to make me blaspheme God and I am ashamed to say so.' So he told him all about it and immediately he was relieved. The old man said to him, 'Do not be unhappy,

The overall treatment of these presumptuous sins is that we need to be aware of them. If we are aware of them and we can expose them and fight them. Then, we have a great chance of being able to beat them and to discern what is right from what is wrong. We need to go to our confession father and reveal these thoughts to him. The fathers tell us that, as soon as we reveal a thought to our father of confession, they will disappear. One of the desert fathers said, "That which is not spoken is not healed".⁹⁸ When we go to the doctor, we

my child, but every time this thought comes to you say, "It is no affair of mine, may your blasphemy remain upon you, Satan, for my soul does not want it." Now everything that the soul does not desire, does not long remain,' and the brother went away healed." See, John Wortley, *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2014), 242-243.

⁹⁸ This may be a summary of a dialogue between Abba Poemen and an anchorite that emphasises the importance of confession: "A brother from Abba Poemen's neighbourhood left to go to another country one day. There he met an anchorite. The latter was very charitable, and many came to see him. The brother told him about Abba Poemen. When he heard of his virtue, the anchorite wanted to see him. Some time afterwards when the brother had returned to Egypt the anchorite went there to see the brother who had formerly paid him a visit. He had told him where he lived. When he saw him, the brother was astonished and very pleased. The anchorite said to him, 'Please will you be so kind as to take me to Abba Poemen.' So he brought him to the old man and presented him, saying, 'This is a great man, full of charity, who is held in high estimation in his district. I have spoken to him about you, and he has come because he wants to see you.' So Abba Poemen received him with joy. They greeted one another and sat down. The visitor began to speak of the Scriptures, of spiritual and of heavenly things. But Abba Poemen turned his face away and answered nothing. Seeing that he did not speak to him, the other went away deeply grieved and said to the brother who had brought him, 'I have made this long journey in vain. For I have come to see the old man, and he does not wish to speak to me.' Then the brother went inside to Abba Poemen and said to him, 'Abba, this great man who has so great a reputation in his own country has come here because of you. Why did you not speak to him?' The old man said, 'He is great and speaks of heavenly things and I am lowly and speak of earthly things. If he had spoken of the passions of the soul, I

cannot say, "I am sick", and expect the doctor to know exactly what is wrong without giving more detail. The same applies in the spiritual realm, "that which is not spoken is not healed." When it is spoken and it is revealed, then Satan will be able to know that no matter how many times he fights me with this, I will reveal it, I will confess it, and I will repent from it. I will continue to fight it and I will resist it. The battle continues.

Q&A: *How do we know our progress in the spiritual life throughout our service and ministry?*

You need to keep a few things in mind. The first thing is that we need to approach our spiritual life safely, and not try to get there quickly. In other words, the journey to become Christ-like needs to be slow, so that way we can get there safely. We do that by practicing our spirituality in a very humble and lowly way in eyes of God. To always put things back to the grace of God and not on our own unrighteousness or our own capabilities. We do all this under the clear guidance of my confession Father.

should have replied, but he speaks to me of spiritual things and I know nothing about that.' Then the brother came out and said to the visitor, 'The old man does not readily speak of the Scriptures, but if anyone consults him about the passions of the soul, he replies.' Filled with compunction, the visitor returned to the old man and said to him, 'What should I do, Abba, for the passions of the soul master me?' The old man turned towards him and replied joyfully, 'This time, you come as you should. Now open your mouth concerning this and I will fill it with good things.' Greatly edified, the other said to him, 'Truly, this is the right way!' He returned to his own country giving thanks to God that he had been counted worthy to meet so great a saint." See, John Wortley, *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2014), 227-228.

We need to have a spiritual guide who will be able to discern with us about the road which we are taking, whether it is good or bad. That is the simple saying “two heads are better than one.” Rather than thinking about the issues ourselves and putting things into practice, we need the guidance of our confession father to be able to say to us, “No, hold on, you do not need to do this. You do not need to go that fast. You do not need to do it to that extent. What I give you is going to be good enough for you to get there safely.” Keep these things in mind. Do not do things of your own accord but do them under the guidance of your confession father.

Whatever it is that you do always practice them in a humble way. Even if you have attained the highest spiritual level in an area say, “Who am I? I am nothing. I am an unprofitable servant.” Pope Shenouda III tell us, “Remember your sins.” Doing that, quickly humbles us. He also says, “Compare yourself with the saints.” So, imagine if we ever feel like, *I am a great worshiper. Look at my prayers, look at my tears in prayer, and look at my spiritual endeavours.* I compare myself with St Paul the Apostle who completed all his ministry for the sake Lord. I compare myself with Abba Antony the Great or somebody like St Mary the Egyptian, who was an example of what purity and what repentance is. That even after she had led a sinful life, she came back with repentances and into purity. How do I compare with Abba Moses the Black who was a gang leader and a murderer and yet became a father for thousands of monks because of his love for God? How do I compare with St Augustine, who was so far away from the Lord but when he came back, he left for us his confessions that are of utmost beauty, in order to show us how much he loves

God? If I compare myself with the saints, I quickly come back to a level of humility.

I should remember my faults, my weaknesses, my sins and compare myself with the saints if I am fought with pride. The devil cannot stand in front of the humble person. Remember the story of Abba Antony, when he was fought by the demons and he used to say to them, "I am less than the smallest of you". Those demons would hear this humility and vanish from before him.

***Q&A:** Sometimes I feel that when I am being humble, that I am pushing myself back a little. How do we approach humility?*

Sometimes we misunderstand what humility is all about. Humility is not a lack of self-confidence. Humility is not walking next to the wall with my head bowed down and not looking at anyone or talking to anyone. I think sometimes we have the wrong idea of humility. I love the explanation that was given by one of the priests who said that humility comes from the Latin *humus* which means earth. It is for the person to understand that they are nothing except dust and ashes.

If God were to take away His Spirit that is in me, which is the life that he has given me - what will I be? I am but a body that goes into the grave that is eaten by the worms on dust and ashes. The great Abraham the patriarch and the father of fathers, stood before the Lord and said, "I am nothing but dust and ashes" (Genesis 18:27). So, who am I then to take pride? Be careful that you do not think of humility as not having any

capability, or the feeling of not having dignity in what we are doing or what we are achieving. My road and vision is being with Christ. Humility is when I know that I am just dust and ashes. It is knowing that deep down I am only a human being. It is who I am before God, not who am I in front of others.

***Q&A:** I find that I compare myself to others. What should I do?*

Remember the beautiful parable of the pharisee and the tax collector who both went into the temple to pray. The pharisee came and stood up before the temple and he said, "I thank you lord that I fast twice two days a week that I tithes all my money and income and I'm not like this tax collector." The tax collector could not even bear to lift his eyes to God, but he just beat on his chest and he said, "Forgive me; I am a sinner." The Lord when He concluded that parable, He said that the tax collector went to his home more justified than the pharisee (Luke 18:9-14). It is not about competing your spiritual life with others – with fasting, prayers, and Bible reading, it is about what my heart is like behind those things. What good is it if I do all these things but my heart is not in it and there is no love. God is going to say, "I do not want your fast. What is that going to do to me as God?" "I want the heart" he says, "My son, give me your heart and let your eyes observe my ways." That is what he wants. The precious emotions and feelings on the inside not the outside.

*“Obedience with abstinence gives men
power over wild beasts.”*

Abba Antony⁹⁹

8.5

Obedience and Patience

The pursuit of virtue are fruits that every one of us is required to have in his or her spiritual life and in our spiritual journey towards Christian perfection. That is why we hear the Lord saying to us, “Therefore, every tree which does not bear fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Matthew 3:10). The Lord tells us very clearly, that there is importance to have fruit in our life. He tells us in the Gospel of St John, “Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine; you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. 6 If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned” (John 15: 4-5).

The first rule about bringing fruit into our life is that we must remember this: Without the Lord we can do nothing. No one can produce fruit by his or her own effort, only God who

⁹⁹ John Wortley, *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, (St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2014), 39.

makes us fruitful. We can liken God to a farmer who owns the land and who hires a servant to look after that land. God owns that land, the seeds, and the fertiliser. He is the One who brings the rain and the sunshine for the cultivation process to happen. He hires servants to look after that land. His servants are you and I. We as servants, must till the ground, put the seeds in, pull the weeds out, put the fertiliser in and harvest the fruit of this labour. The Lord is the owner of the vineyard and we are the vinedressers. We are the ones who are working in his vineyard. Despite all the work that we might do, we really have no merit in what we achieve, because it is the Lord who gives the increase. It is the Lord who gives the fruit at the end of the day. That is why the Lord says to us, "So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do'" (Luke 17:10). That is the intention that we are meant to have. Even if we do everything right, if we fulfil all righteousness, that we say we are unprofitable servants, and this is a sign of humility that the Lord requests from us. St Augustine puts it in a very beautiful way. He says, "O Lord, everything good in me is due to you, the rest is my fault."¹⁰⁰

We must remember also that virtues do not come on their own. We must train ourselves in the appropriate way in order to attain these virtues. St Basil the Great says, "As the wrestler is tried in the ring, the soldier in battle, the hero in adversity, so the Christian is trained in trials."¹⁰¹ Only through certain

¹⁰⁰ Saint Augustine, *The Confessions*, (UK: Hendrickson Publishers Marketing, LLC, 2004), 40.

¹⁰¹ Cf. Wace, Henry, trans., *Basil: Letters and Selected Works. Nicene and post-Nicene fathers*, Philip Schaff ed., Vol. III (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994).

trials are we actually trained in order to attain these virtues. And they are often likened to a ladder. If you can think of a ladder that has many steps that lead to heaven. Some of the virtues are on the bottom of the ladder, some of the virtues are on top. The fathers tell us that we should not skip one part of the ladder to go on to the next. You must go through each step at a time in order to achieve the results and achieve them safely. At the bottom of the ladder, there are two basic virtues that are obedience and patience. On top of the ladder, there are higher virtues that we can try to also attain once we have mastered these lower virtues. These are humility and love. And love, of course, is considered as the highest of all virtues. It is often called the all-encompassing virtue and one must have love in order to have only other virtues as well. So, there is a connection and a circle.

In training for virtues, we are advised by the church fathers to take one at a time. Once you have finished training for one virtue, then you can go on to the next. If you skip one and you try to attain another, then you might find that it does not work for you, because virtues are accumulative. By that I mean that training yourself in one virtue makes it easier to attain the next one, and so forth. For example, if you train yourself in obedience and patience, meekness might be within your grasp. Once you have mastered meekness, then you are actually very close at the doorstep of humility and so on. Training for one virtue equips you to be ready for the next one. However, training needs a trainer, or a coach. No one can make it in athletics without a coach. They cannot be successful without having a proper coach that they listen to. We also, as athletes for Christ, need to have a spiritual coach and this is your father

and confession. He should oversee your training programme, so to speak.

Many people have discovered the perils of doing it on their own and encountered a lot of problems. That is why, I suppose, obedience to my father in confession is a must. Otherwise, how am I going to be trained in order to achieve these results? St John Climacus says, "He who is sometimes obedient to his father, and sometimes disobedient, is like a person who sometimes puts lotion in his eyes, and sometimes quicklime. For it is said, when one builds and another pulls down, what profit have they had but labour?"¹⁰² In other words, if my coach or confession father is trying to build me up in a certain way, and I am not obedient, then I have actually pulled down. As one builds and the other pulls down, and then there is no profit in the end, for the labour that we have put in.

Obedience and patience are considered as prerequisites for all other virtues. You cannot have any fruit in any virtue if you have not mastered these two basic virtues. If I have no obedience, then I will not be able to follow the instructions that are given to me by my trainer. Obviously, there will be no progress also. Likewise, without patience, I will not also be able to persist for my training to bring fruit and to bring results. That is why in the parable of the sower, our Lord says, "But the ones that fell on good ground are those who having heard the word with a noble and good heart, keep it and bear fruit with patience" (Luke 8:15). It is important that this patience is a virtue and a basis for all other virtues in order that we attain fruit.

¹⁰² John Climacus, *The ladder of divine ascent* Vol. 286, trans., Norman Russel, (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), 41.

The Virtue of Obedience

I suppose if we want to just sum it up in a spiritual manner, it is really subjecting your will, to the will of another. The fathers of the desert took great pain in training their novices and their disciples in this very important basic virtue. For example, we all know the beautiful story of St John the Short. He was told by his Abba to take a dry piece of wood stick, plant it and to water it daily, even though the water was miles and miles away.¹⁰³ Another Abba told his novice to stand at the door of the monastery, and to bow himself down to everyone entering through the door and begging them saying, "Please, pray for me for I am a leper."¹⁰⁴ Imagine the humiliation that he would have received. These training exercises to you and I, might seem very ludicrous, but all this shows how serious the fathers of the desert took their pursuit of virtue. Before we pass judgment on this very difficult technique that they use, or had used, please let us look at the results of the fruits of their labour and persistence. After years of toiling to bring water this dry piece of wood, it budded, became a tree and gave fruit, to the extent that the master or the other took this fruit to the other monks and told them to eat of the fruit of obedience. Obedience brings results, but you see, it needs patience as well. To be truly obedient, we do not have to agree with the request that is being made. In fact, the more objectionable the request that is made, the more reward that you will get for your obedience because the harder it is, the more the reward that is kept for you.

¹⁰³ John Wortley, *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2014), 131.

¹⁰⁴ Fr Athanasius Iskander, *Practical Spirituality according to the Desert Fathers*, (Australia: St. Shenouda Monastery Press, 2008), 69.

When God asked Abraham to offer His only son, Isaac as a burnt offering, we do not hear that Abraham stopped for even a moment to think or to even question if this request was reasonable or not. He did it, and he did it by all intention. Of course, God did not intend to have Abraham slay his son, but God gave Abraham this seemingly unreasonable request in order to test his obedience and to leave us an example of how to be obedient as well. Abraham was rewarded generously for his obedience (Genesis 22). In the same manner, you and I will not benefit if we are obedient in the things that we like or agree with. You benefit when you practice obedience with things that you might disagree with, or not even like to do, but out of obedience, you do them. For example, if my dad says to me, "Get dressed, because we are going to go have dinner at your favourite restaurant," and I am obedient to this, I should not expect to get a reward for that because it is something that I already enjoy. However, if dad says to me, "Help me mow the lawn or take out the rubbish" or mum says, "Do the dishes," and it is a matter that I do not like doing, that is when I get rewarded. Of course, I must say here, that you are rewarded more when an order comes from your wife or your husband and you are obedient. A reward is kept for you in heaven.

I suppose what I am saying here is that the motive behind our obedience must be genuine. Why are we being obedient or disobedient? The motive for obedience is very important. St Maximus the Confessor said, "As has been said many times in everything we do, God examines our motive to see whether we are doing it for His sake, or for some other purpose. Thus, when we desire to do something good, we should not do it for the sake of popularity. We should have God as our goal, so

that with our gaze always fixed on him, we may do everything for his sake. Otherwise, we shall undergo all the trouble of performing the act, and yet lose the reward.”¹⁰⁵ Because if you are being obedient for the sake of another human being only, you will do the act, but maybe the reward will not be there.

Another important aspect of obedience is that it should be *in* the Lord. It must be through Scripture and the commandments of the Lord. That is why for example, children are commanded to obey their parents in the Lord for this is right, as simple as it is said in Ephesians, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord for this is right” (Ephesians 6:1). That request must be made according to the teachings of Scripture and the Bible, because we ought to obey God rather than man.

How then, do we train for obedience? First and foremost, we need to consult with our father and confession. Our need to sincerely pray for God to help us, and to sustain us during this work, so that we can start the work of training. The recommendation is that we start very early in the morning, when our day begins, by reviewing the chances that God may give us to practice this wonderful virtue. Start by making first and foremost a resolve in our own mind and in our own heart that we are going to be obedient throughout the day. Whether it be to parents, our teachers, our husband or wife, and anyone else for that matter. The resolve when it is settled within the heart and inside the mind becomes a conviction. We are convinced then, that we are set on it. Once we have made that resolve, we need to say to ourselves, “I am not doing this

¹⁰⁵ George Charles Berthold, trans., *Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings*, (USA: Paulist Press, 1985), 47-51.

for anyone, but only for God's sake." In other words, when a request is difficult, do not back down. We need to know that this is a huge test that the Lord has put in front of us to see whether we can excel in this virtue or not. It may be hard in the beginning, especially if we are asked to do a task at a difficult time when we do not want to do it especially if it is during our most favourite TV show etc. There will be times when we are tested at the most awkward time, but we still need to think, "this is my chance. What am I going to do? What is my resolve here?" And when we force ourselves to do it for the sake of succeeding in our efforts to implant this virtue in our soul, then we can only become better and better, and more consistent at it.

If the task is boring us to death, or the task is very difficult then try to assure yourself and say, "My parents think that I am obedient to them. They do not know that I am doing this for my own good." Because, truth is, we are the one who are going to benefit. The adult might benefit from the act, having it done, but we are the ones who are going to attain a virtue and to have that virtue for life. If the task is objectionable, then maybe console yourself and say, "I am doing this to get a reward directly from God, not from my parents or my husband or my wife." St Mark the Ascetic says, "Think nothing and do nothing without a purpose directed to God. Make sure that in your endeavour for obedience that you are doing it for God. For to journey without direction is wasted effort."¹⁰⁶ I suppose this answers the question that many people ask, "There are

¹⁰⁶ G.E.H Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware, eds., *The Philokalia: Compiled by St Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St Makarios of Corinth* Vol 1, (UK: Faber & Faber, 2011), 150.

lots of good people in society, but they are not Christian - are their works good? Are their works going to be rewarded?" Again, are we talking about earthly reward, or a spiritual and heavenly reward that comes from the Lord? Any work that falls short for the glory of God basically just falls short, unfortunately. So, make sure that we think nothing and do nothing without a purpose directed to God. Do not ask yourself if the request is reasonable or not, just for the sake of acquiring the virtue of obedience. As a matter of fact, like I said, the more difficult or unreasonable the request is, the more quickly that we will acquire this virtue. A classic example that is given to us in a beautiful book called *The Way of the Ascetics*¹⁰⁷ is this: Your wife tells you, "Take an umbrella because it is going to rain today." Then you go outside, and you look outside, and it is beautiful and sunny. There is not a cloud in the sky. There is no chance it is going to rain. What do you do here? Argue the point, or just take the umbrella. It is a test for obedience. If people give you strange looks because you are carrying an umbrella in the middle of a bright sunny day, maybe just smile and say, "They do not know what I am doing. They do not know what I am practicing." Seems weird...seems strange, but I will tell you what? You know what your journey is, and you know where you want to go. Do not worry about what others might think but worry about what your journey is and where it is leading to.

Obedience means that we need to be prompted to do what we are being asked for. The two classical answers that we always hear particularly from young people is, "Do I have to

¹⁰⁷ Tito Colliander, *Way of the Ascetics: The Ancient Tradition of Discipline and Inner Growth*, (USA: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985).

or in a minute ... I will do it in a minute." Of course, that means it can take forever, and an Egyptian minute that is another tangent altogether. If we are serious about training in the virtue of obedience, we must force ourselves to be prompt and to do things straightaway.

I strongly believe that we get rewarded for obedience irrespective of who it is to and what the circumstances are. But there are many virtues that overlap with each other. So, obedience needs discernment and wisdom. If I am just obedient and a person, for example, is devious, and he wants me to put me on a track that is going to lead me away from God and I am obedient to them, I can lose a lot of the virtues that I have attained and lose my eternity as a whole. It needs to be practiced with wisdom. And that is why this whole concept of training is important. You know, if something is not making sense or is worrying me and in the spirit of discernment, I question it, then two heads are better than one. You and your confession father may think together, pray together, fast about it, and then maybe work out what God is intending. We are talking here about obedience in the Lord. It is very important that we have some sort of boundaries knowing that I am doing this for the Lord. Therefore, anything that is not going to glorify the Lord, I have the right to object about it.

We sometimes forget one important thing, that is, we have a strong defender who is Christ Himself. For example, if at work somebody is malice and intends to verbally hurt, harm, and take advantage of me, rather than me taking revenge for myself, I think I would rather let the Lord do it because His revenge is much wiser, much more loving and much more, long

term. It needs a balance, but as recommendation, if your boss asks you something to do, it is usually a good thing to obey.

Look at this beautiful story that illustrates this beautiful obedience. Mark the Calligrapher lived in a monastery with other monks. The monks made a complaint to the bishop that the Abbot of the monastery loves Mark more than all the other monks. The bishop came to the monastery to investigate the matter. The Abbot said to the bishop, "Your Grace, come and I will show you why." The Abbot went knocking on the doors of the cells of all the monks and each one of them said, "I am coming", only to open the door some minutes later, when you knocked on the door of Mark. The door opened instantly, and the Abbot took the bishop inside the cell where Mark was sitting to work. There in his cell, there was a manuscript that Mark was inscribing. In it, there was an unfinished vowel. Can you imagine he stopped in the middle of the letter, did not continue to write the letter, and got up to answer the door? When Mark heard the knock on the door, he did not finish the vowel that he was inscribing, but immediately got up to open the door. Of course, when the bishop saw this, he said to the abbot, "Not only do I understand why you love him, but now I love him too."¹⁰⁸ It is obedience as opposed to the letter or even to the half letter. It is real obedience here. How long then should I keep practicing this virtue? I suppose if we are sincere in doing these exercises, in a way that the church fathers described to us, it will probably take us maybe just a few weeks to start to feel this wonderful virtue in our life. It will not take long at all. Believe it or not, it will almost become

¹⁰⁸ This story is recalled in the sayings of Abba Silvanus. See, John Wortley, *An Introduction to the Desert Fathers*, (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 81-82.

like a habit to become obedient, and to do things straightaway and to submit to the will of another for the sake of receiving this virtue and receiving its rewards. It might be difficult at the beginning, but later it will be quite effortless. Obedience will become like second nature to us.

The Virtue of Patience

We live in a world today, where we so badly and desperately need patience. How many of us, for example become so upset if a person in the car in front of us does not take off when the traffic-light turns green? We beep to get them moving. Or how many of us order a coffee that takes a few minutes extra and become a little frustrated. I think we live in a world where patience has become less and less and has diminished as time goes on. But the importance of patience in Scripture is not just given to us by anyone, it is given to us by the Lord Himself. When the Lord was speaking about the great tribulation that will come before His Second Coming. The Lord said something amazing, "And you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But he, who endures to the end, will be saved" (Matthew 10:22). And again, "By your patience, possess your souls" (Luke 21:19). So, in speaking of these last days, that precede His second coming, the Lord is telling us that we need to have patience, we need to endure during these times.

He also says to us, "When the Son of Man comes, will he really find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8) And again, he says, "Because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold" (Matthew 24:12). This means that faith and love will be weakened in those perilous days. However, he who endures or

he who is patient till the end will be saved and by our patience we can possess or preserve our soul. Patience may be the virtue that saves a person in those last days. That is how important patience is. Also, in the book of Revelation, which speaks about the last days as well, it stresses the importance of patience and overcoming the difficulties of those days: "Here is the patience of the saints. Here are those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus" (Revelation 14:12).

I suppose patience is not just important for survival in the days. But it is also important for us to in our spiritual survival today, just as it will be important to the end of time. St Paul says, "For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise you are in need of endurance" (Hebrews 10:36). This is patience. That even after doing the will of God, we still need patience in order to receive the promise of God. St James says, "Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, waiting patiently for it until it receives the early and latter rain" (James 5:7). Patience is what keeps us going and struggling towards perfection in the hope of this precious fruit that we are all seeking. St Paul tells us, "Let us run with endurance the race that is sitting before us" (Hebrews 12:1). How then can I train for patience?

Like any other virtue, I need to ask the guidance of my confessional father. I need to pray earnestly to the Lord to guide me in using the many occasions that He grants me every day in order to practice patience. Do not ask the Lord to give you patience and to give it to you now, because that in itself

is being impatient and demanding. I know that this could be a love relationship between us and God, but when I demand it in such a way, that in itself is being impatient. Think of the last time that you were impatient in a certain circumstance and ask yourself whether you could have just pushed yourself a little bit further to be patient. Who knows how much that could have subsided an argument or resulted in a calm atmosphere rather than a difficult atmosphere? We could have gained people over, and you could have gained so much out of the situation. God in His love towards us, will give us plenty of chances to practice and acquire this important virtue of patience. Unfortunately, because we are not attuned towards the Lord properly, we fail to realise these opportunities to practice, and we miss taking advantage of them. For example, if I am out of a job for quite some time, and I have sent hundreds of resumes to various places; I have prayed about it. Still there is not a single response that is coming back. Sometimes we might start to blame God, and say, "Why is God doing this to me?" I think one simple answer would be: God is giving me a golden opportunity to practice patience here. How easy is it for God to give us that job? Right away, He can do that with no problems at all. But an instant drop will not lead me to eternity as much as patience can. Jobs, they come, and they go. Patience stays with me into eternity, in heaven. God gives me a chance to practice and acquire patience and the sooner that I do that, the sooner He will give me that job as well, because He can see my patience and there is a reward for patience.

More often than not, we are actually caught up and absorbed in the issue or problem of trying to find out why God is doing this or trying to solve it in our own human terms,

without realising why God in His mercy is sending us this problem. St Paul tells us, "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God" (Romans 8:28). A wise person then, as soon as something happens that he or she does not understand, should ask themselves, "What message is God sending me? What virtue does God want me to practice now?" St Paul writes, " Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it..." (Hebrews 12:11). Even though initially the problem may not be something that brings us joy, which is natural, yet if we use it as an exercise of patience, the fruits will give us peace and joy.

One time a mother said, "My kids are driving me crazy." My response to her was, "You are very lucky." After some strange looks from her, I continued and said, "Because your kids are taking you through the school of virtue to teach you patience, love and care. And all this is for your eternity." The looks were still a little weird, but they subsided somewhat. Then I said to her, "You should thank God that your kids are driving you crazy because they are helping you and leading you towards heaven..."

You see, my dear friend, the Bible tells us again and again that problems are good for us because they teach us patience. The Apostle James says, " knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing" (James 1:3-4). That means trials and tribulations create patience in us and we are warned about this work of patience, that it must be perfected through practice before we ourselves reach

out to the goal of Christian perfection. Regarding trials and tribulations, St John Climacus says, "He who truly loves God is devoted to His holy will. No matter what might befall him, he accepts everything as from the hand of God, with a firm faith that all this serves to his spiritual benefit. For the soul that is devoted to God the misfortunes that befall it in this life serve as steps leading it up to perfection."¹⁰⁹ Know that our trials and tribulations lead us to perfection. It is almost as if we have been put into the furnace to come out pure. That is what Job said when he went through all his calamities that the Lord allowed. He said, "He is testing me so that I may be as pure as gold" (Job 23:10). Gold when it goes into the furnace it comes out precious, really refined and very expensive. You know its value is increased; you know dramatically. In a similar way, when we go through trials and tribulations, we are becoming more perfect. St Paul tells us the same thing, "Tribulation produces perseverance and perseverance, character" (Romans 5:4). Character meaning experience here and commenting on his verse, one of the saints said, "You should be ready each day to receive all kinds of afflictions, regarding them as your release from many sins. You should thank God for them. Through them, you may acquire a close and unimpeachable communion with God."¹¹⁰ Trials make us closer to God.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. "A poor monk is lord of the world. He has entrusted his cares to God and by faith has obtained all men as his slaves. He will not tell his need to man, and he receives what comes to him, as from the hand of the Lord." Archimandrite Lazarus Moore, *John Climacus: The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, (Boston: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 2001), 122.

¹¹⁰ A quote by St Symeon the New Theologian (949-1022). G.E.H Palmer, Philip Sherrard, Kallistos Ware, eds., *The Philokalia: The Complete Text Compiled by St Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St Makarios of Corinth Vol 4*, (UK: Faber & Faber, 2011), 69.

Remember that the Lord said He will not test you beyond your means. He will give you the way of escape. What is this way, you can put this other verse into this equation, and that is the words of the Lord, "I am the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6). The way is Christ. If I am with Christ during the tribulation, then He is the way that I will escape this by being patient and by being enduring during this difficult time. Once we get our head around the difficulties that are sent our way, are realise that this is for our own good, and we can use them to exercise ourselves to be experienced in patience. Do not ever think that you are alone during the trial. Far from it, it is the opposite. Can you believe that? St John Chrysostom says, "If you suffer many trials, do you suppose that God has left you and He despises you? If you do not suffer, then He has truly left you."¹¹¹ When I am suffering, it means that the Lord is actually sending these my way or allowing them to happen for me to reach perfection. Having recognised a problem, I can now see there is an opportunity to practice patience. I then need to prepare my mind for using this opportunity to its fullest potential, or like Scripture says to "let the patience have its perfect work" (James 1:4).

Back to the example of the interview. It has been now some few months since I have had an interview, nothing is coming my way. I have resolved in my mind to say, "Even if it takes two years without a job, I will continue in my patience." Comfort yourself and say, "God loves me. That is why He wants me to receive the incorruptible instead of the corruptible, the

¹¹¹ St John Chrysostom's 29th Homily on the Letter to the Hebrews. Philip Schaff, eds., *St. Chrysostom: Homilies on the Gospel of St. John and the Epistle to the Hebrews. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers First Series*, (USA: Cosimo Classics, 2007), 499.

heavenly instead of the earthly, and the eternal instead of the temporal.” This is the litany of oblations that we pray in the Divine Liturgy, early in the morning. Strengthen yourself by saying that the sooner I resolve within myself to endure till the end, the sooner that God will solve the problem also for me.

One of the saints said, “You cannot describe to someone the taste of honey, he has to taste it for himself.” You must try *patience* for yourself. It is not so easy to accept a description from another. When you exercise yourself in this virtue faithfully, then you will taste the sweet results that come from it. The results are worth it, believe me, because it will remain with you for the rest of your life. Once you have completed this exercise successfully, the experience will remain with you till the end of your life here on earth and in eternity with you as well. You will always go back to that same resolve because you have set yourself in that motion. Put in your mind and in your heart that you are going to be patient. Anything that comes past you, and you are patient, this practice will help you during that difficult time. Therefore, when things start to improve, then they get worse again, remember, you have made that resolve. Go back to that initial resolve again. Now you are well grounded in patience, and you are ready to move to the next step on the ladder that leads to Christian perfection.

It is not easy and can take many years to perfect patience. But you must start. The quicker you start, the quicker you get there. The more you practice it, the more you become proficient at it. The desert fathers tell us that no matter how difficult the road is for any virtue to attain, practice makes perfect. Practice time and time again.

"Just as the king's body-guard stands always on guard at his side, so the soul should always be on guard against the demon of fornication."

*Abba Poemen*¹¹²

8.6

The Virtue of Chastity

Why did God create sexuality in man? Is it only just for procreation or is it a bit more than that?

I remember reading an old article by Bishop Moussa, the bishop of Youth Affairs, in *El-Keraza*, which is the official magazine for the Coptic Church. He wrote that God created sexuality not just for the sole purpose of the preservation of humanity, but that it takes on a perspective totally different to the animal kingdom. We know in the animal kingdom that mating occurs at certain periods of the year and then they are not sexually active, but it is not the same with humankind. Why is this so? Bishop Moussa also gives us the answer in the same article, and he puts it in a very eloquent way. He says, "It is because God wanted humans to share and enjoy a holy kind of love that is likened to the love of Christ and His church."¹¹³ You might not think of Christ and the

¹¹² John Wortley, *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2014), 229.

¹¹³ Fr Athanasius Iskander, *Practical Spirituality according to the Desert Fathers*, (Aus-

church when we speak about sexuality, but actually, that is what it boils down to. St Paul puts it in this way, "This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church" (Ephesians 5:32). This is how St Paul speaks about the mystery of the sacrament of marriage.

It is a great sacrament because it mirrors the relationship between Christ and the church. It is also a holy sacrament because sexuality within holy matrimony is very different to any other sexual relationship outside of marriage. St Paul says, "Marriage is honourable among all, and the bed undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge" (Hebrews 13:4). Again, we are told to "flee sexual immorality" (1 Corinthians 6:18) - some translations use the word *fornication*. He continues to say, "Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality, sins against his own body." Sexuality within marriage is uniquely blessed, because it is a sacrament, and it matches the love of Christ and His bride, the church. Sexuality outside of marriage is distinct from any other sin because it defiles the image of the love between Christ and the church itself. That is why St Paul reiterates again, "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a harlot? Certainly not!" (1 Corinthians 6:15).

St Athanasius relates this to us by giving a beautiful analogy that contrasts sexuality within and outside of marriage. He says, "If a soldier goes out to war and kills 20 of the enemy soldiers, he is decorated. But if in the time of peace, he goes

tralia: St. Shenouda Monastery Press, 2008), 84.

out in the street and kills one man he is condemned. It is the same action done in different circumstances with completely opposite outcomes.” Therefore, the sexual act within marriage and the sexual act outside of marriage is the same sexual act, but the consequences of them are totally different.

The evidence that human, marital love is blessed is presented to us in one of the most beautiful books of Scripture, and that is the book of “The Song of songs.” It is a book that has been so misunderstood by many people. It has been attacked as a pornographic book, but some people do not understand the beauty of the relationship between the soul and God. There is nothing sinful or pornographic about this book at all, or even within the marital relationship. It imitates the love between Christ and the church. “Husbands love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her” (Ephesians 5:25). This is marital sexuality and that is why it is so different to the sinful sexuality that is outside of marriage. Sinful sexuality is concerned with lust. It is concerned with greed and taking, exploiting, seizing or self-gratification, and so forth. Whereas marital sexuality is about the giving of oneself to another. That is why marital sexual love should be modelled on the same love of Christ and the church, who gave Himself for her.

Within marriage, the person gives of him or herself to their partner, and that is why sexual immorality is so abhorred by the Lord in Scripture. We are told to “flee sexual immorality” or fornication, and one might think that is easier said than done. Daily, we are bombarded by things that have sexual innuendos and connotations; this makes the virtue of chastity the most

elusive. We think that we have reached to a certain stage only to be overthrown by it again and to be thrown into the pit one more time. However, the Bible tells us about the perils of this sin. Listen carefully to what St Paul says to the Corinthians, "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revellers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Corinthians 6:9-10). That is a quite comprehensive list. The bible has not left one of these things without condemning the actions of it.

Today, it is very difficult to talk about things like homosexuality because we might be considered a bigot or a racist. People may think that we do not have any consideration for the *different types* of people out there. Although, we cannot glean past Scripture when it comes to these matters. That is why in this sweeping statement of First Corinthians chapter 6 verses 9 and 10, the Bible condemns all sorts of sexual, immoral acts. Fornication means pre-marital sex, while adultery, of course, means extramarital sex – both condemned by Scripture. There are two degrees of that one sin, yet the punishment may be different. A fornicator commits sin against his or her own body and that of the person that they commit the sin with. Whereas, with adultery, the person commits sin against his own body, against their partner and against the person that they have committed the sin with. Note how the homosexual act is also condemned. It talks about both homosexuals and sodomites – referring to both participants in the male's homosexual act. Lesbianism is also condemned

by Scripture. This is clearly written in the book of Romans where St Paul says, "For this reason God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature" (Romans 1:26). Christ raises the bar and classifies any type of lustful passion as a sexually immoral act. He says, "But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5:28). This is the level that the Lord expects of us. Christ takes us to a level of perfection, that if a person even looks at a woman and desires her in his own heart, then he has already committed adultery with her. It is a difficult situation to be in, but the Lord requires nothing less of His people. Of course, it goes without saying, that a woman looking with lust upon a man or a person looking with lust to the same sex is also guilty of the same adultery in their heart.

Today of course, the list gets bigger and bigger, and pornography has become such a major problem. Pornography leads to many sexually immoral acts, sexual fantasies, and unnatural acts, that we may be all familiar with because we are surrounded by these things in society. However, although the Bible condemns these immoral acts, it does not explain how we can fight against these acts and how we can try to avoid them. To do this, we need to draw upon the experience of the church fathers or the desert fathers. This is what they give us in terms of expertise. They tell us that there are some basic factors we need to keep in mind in order to reach this virtue of chastity. This is what they say: "If you want to control your sexual desires, and if you want to reach the virtue of chastity, the first thing you need to do is to control your stomach."¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ There are many Church and Desert Fathers who speak on this, most notable St

And they say that it is very unlikely for someone overcome by gluttony to be able to achieve chastity. This is the consensus of the opinion of most of the early church fathers. They say that a full stomach ignites the passion of the flesh, and it makes sense, if one is not able to control his or her passion for food, they will certainly not be able to control their passion for sexual desires. Therefore, they advise to control the stomach.

The fathers say that oversleeping contributes to increase in the sexual drive. Therefore, one must fight against over-sleeping in order to avoid falling into sexual sins. Even scripture itself tells us that we need to fight against oversleeping. For example, Solomon says, “How long will you slumber or sluggard when will you arise from your sleep?” (Proverbs 6:9). If you think that this might only be spiritual direction to the person who is lazy in his or her life, he adds something much clearer, “Do not love sleep, lest you come to poverty” (Proverbs 20:13). So, control the stomach, control your sleep and, the church fathers talk about controlling the temper.

They insist that if we cannot control our temper then we will not be able to control our carnal desires. The fathers very clearly classify sins and add that anger and fornication belong to the same category of “excitable sins.” One of the fathers tells us that the demon of anger and the demon of fornication are the one in the same demon.¹¹⁵ So, a person who cannot

John Climacus in his 15th step of the Ladder of Divine Ascent: Archimandrite Lazarus Moore, *John Climacus: The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, (Boston: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 2001), 103-121.

¹¹⁵ Cf., Archimandrite Lazarus Moore, *John Climacus: The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, (Boston: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 2001), 103-121; and, Boniface Ramsey, trans., *John Cassian: The Conferences, Ancient Christian Writers 57* (USA: Paulist Press,

control their anger is a person who might have difficulty attaining the virtue of chastity. They say, “One who is easily excitable to anger will be easily excitable to the commands of the flesh.” Likewise, one of the fathers says the following about controlling anger: “As a person progresses in mildness and patience of heart, so also does he in the purity of body. And the further he has driven away the passion of anger, the more tightly will he hold on to chastity.”¹¹⁶ The less angry I am, the closer I am to the virtue of chastity.

There are also two more factors that we need to be careful of when we are trying to reach this virtue of chastity. It is an issue that may concern young people, as youth can be very easily affected by this – that is, the problem of drinking alcohol. Alcohol is a very potent stimulus of the passions of the flesh. Resistance to sexual sins diminishes when one allows himself to drink even in a moderate amount. So, one must be very careful with regards to alcohol. Even Shakespeare warns against the use of alcohol, that it can drive a person to lustful desires, he summed it up and said that “it creates the desire but takes away the performance.”¹¹⁷ I cannot stress to you the number of times that we, as priests, hear so many horror stories about drinking, and what it can lead to in terms of fornication. Let me share one story with you that is conveyed by Fr Athanasius that is very vivid in his mind and it is a sad story indeed:

1997), 151-156; 191-209.

¹¹⁶ This is mentioned in the writings of St John Cassian in a book titled ‘Conferences of Saint John Cassian’. Boniface Ramsey, trans., *John Cassian: The Conferences, Ancient Christian Writers 57* (USA: Paulist Press, 1997), 151-156.

¹¹⁷ Roma Gill, ed., *William Shakespeare: Macbeth*, (UK: OUP Oxford, 2012), 31.

“It concerns a 16-year-old girl of German descent, who was very religious. She used to come, and baby sit my children when they were little. We were very pleased with her, since she read the Bible to our children, a rare find even in the seventies. One day her mother told her, ‘You don’t have a life! Why don’t you attend the neighbourhood New Year’s party?’ She agreed. Someone gave her this funny tasting orange juice and she drank it. Not only did she lose her virginity on New Year’s Eve, but she realised later that she became pregnant. The perpetrator was a married man with kids. The mother refused to allow her an abortion. She was a retired nurse; she went back to work to allow her daughter to keep the baby. Six months later, she died of a heart attack.” She could not see her daughter go through this anguish, because of what she had recommended her to do.¹¹⁸ So, this was because of drinking. She did not know that her drink was spiked – yes, sure. But again, maybe there are many other stories that you know of where alcohol can be quite a big problem. Drinking is something we need to be careful of regarding our aspiration to the chastity virtue.

There is another problem particularly affecting young people, and that is dancing. Dancing is one of the most common ways for wrong relationships to start. It can make a person’s desires start to rage within them, and then before they know it, they might find that they have lost something very precious to them or have acted in a wrong way towards another because they have let their guard down. Again, Fr Athanasius, tells us about this story. He went to the USA to cover for another priest

¹¹⁸ Fr Athanasius Iskander, *Practical Spirituality according to the Desert Fathers*, (Australia: St. Shenouda Monastery Press, 2008), 88.

who was away on a break. After holy communion, this young girl about 13 years of age came to him, crying and wanting to confess. After he had consoled her somewhat, she finally said to him “Abuna, I had sexual intercourse.” He asked her how this came about, if she was raped, or if somebody forced themselves upon her. She said, “No, I wanted it as much as the other guy did. With the music and the lights and our bodies close to each other, I had no desire to resist.” She lost her virginity that night as well.¹¹⁹ Dancing and drinking are going to affect a person’s pursuit for the virtue of chastity.

Let us return to the fathers and what they say about this virtue. The fathers tell us that even if we control our overeating and our oversleeping and our anger, we still need another virtue before we can attain the virtue of chastity. Without humility, we cannot obtain chastity. Why are they both related? Let us examine the incredible wisdom that they have behind. They say that the most common problem in our fighting against desires of the flesh is self-reliance; that is, we rely on our own souls. A self-reliant person thinks, “I am going to do this, or I am going to do that; I will have victory over this; I will achieve this.” Let me share with you a motto that you need to be very careful of in your spiritual life. No matter what it is that you are trying to achieve in your spiritual life, the moment that you start to put the words, “I” or “me” in a sentence, expect that there might be a fall. A person who relies on themselves will be vulnerable to fall. Unless we abandon ourselves, we will fail, time and again. No one was ever able to control their carnal desires by self-control; it just does not

¹¹⁹ Fr Athanasius Iskander, *Practical Spirituality according to the Desert Fathers*, (Australia: St. Shenouda Monastery Press, 2008), 89.

happen. How does this happen? Abbot Chaeremon explains to us in the book called, *The Conferences* that is compiled by St John Cassian, says, "We are unable to acquire chastity through our efforts, unless while exerting ourselves constantly. We are taught in the school of experience that is granted to us by the bounty of Divine grace. For this reason, one should preserve tirelessly in his efforts so that he will deserve to be freed from the assaults of the flesh. But thanks to the Divine gift. It is all due to the divine gift. It is not about a person's own abilities. He must not believe that he will attain by himself the bodily chastity that he seeks. He cannot attain it by yourself."¹²⁰

Maybe this analogy will explain the concept. Imagine a little child trying to reach for a toy on a table. The table is too high for that child to reach, so he tries to stand on his toes, but he cannot reach. He starts jumping up and down in order to reach the toy, but he still cannot reach it. He even tries to climb on some objects or another, only to fall and hurt himself. Totally frustrated, this child has no option and begins to cry. The father who is watching him from afar reaches over and grabs the toy and gives it to the little child. The little child did not get the toy of his own efforts, but his efforts inclined the heart of the father to help him and to give him the toy. This is exactly what you and I need to do in our endeavour to acquire the virtue of chastity. The problem is that we do the same as this little child in the beginning. We try and fail multiple times, then in our frustration, we cry to God and say, "Why aren't you helping me? Why aren't you looking after me?" and God in His mercy will give us a respite from this fight for little

¹²⁰ Boniface Ramsey, trans., *John Cassian: The Conferences, Ancient Christian Writers 57* (USA: Paulist Press, 1997), 151-156.

while. However, sooner or later the devil will suggest to us that we did this by our own effort, only to find that he smites us with another fall and find that we lose everything again and we are back to square one. But the most fascinating thing is that we keep repeating this thing to ourselves and we do not learn from it; we do not learn that this is given to us from God, and we need to be careful that we are not relying on ourselves. Again, it is the mercy of God, who snatches you and I from any problem that we might encounter. It is not our own efforts, and if we think that it is, then we are going to fail, and fail dismally.

So, then what can I do if I fall into this trap of relying on myself? First, I must realise that God allows these falls for my own good, and secondly, I must acknowledge that my pride is the reason for my fall and to ask for God's grace back in my life. Abbot Chaeremon_says regarding this, that "when someone has begun to rejoice over an extended period of purity, believing that he can no longer fall away from his virtue, he will start boasting within himself. But when having been abandoned by the Lord for his own good, he realizes that the state of purity in which he placed his confidence is abandoning him. Let him return at once to the author of his integrity,"¹²¹ – talking about the Lord. One must be trained by God through these oscillations, until he is confirmed by the grace of God in the purity he is seeking. These oscillations involve falling and rising... falling and rising and this might take years for a person to reach true chastity. There is nothing wrong with falling and rising, because they are on the road of attaining this virtue. A fall might encourage us to learn from and to try

¹²¹ Boniface Ramsey, trans., *John Cassian: The Conferences, Ancient Christian Writers 57* (USA: Paulist Press, 1997), 151-156.

as much as possible to avoid falling again into that problem. These oscillations are very useful to us because they give us experience, not only in fighting against fornication, but also against pride and self-righteousness. When I know that my pride and my self-righteousness could be the reason for my falling, then I will also learn from these experiences. Again, do not be dismayed if you have been falling in this trap because even the experienced and the desert fathers also went through this until they reached perfection. We hear for example about Amma Sarah, one of the great ascetics of the desert, that she fought against fornication for 14 years until she reached her freedom from this passion¹²² – and many other saints also did the same. We hear about Abba Moses the Black (or Moses the Strong), who went to his father of confession, Abba Isidore, thirteen times in one night complaining of sexual thoughts. Until, again, he found freedom from this passion.¹²³ St John Climacus says, “Do not be surprised if you fall every day, but do not give up. Stand your ground courageously, and assuredly an angel who guards you will honour your patience.”¹²⁴ “By your patience possess your souls,” (Luke 21:19). This is what Scripture tells us.

Finally, we are humbled by the many times we thought that we have prevailed, only to discover that we did not. Instead, we fall into the state of littleness of heart or of lack of self-confidence. When we admit defeat and express our inability

¹²² John Wortley, *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, (St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2014), 300-301.

¹²³ Abraham J. Malherbe, Everett Ferguson, and John Myendorff, eds., *The Life of Moses by Gregory of Nyssa*, (Paulist Press, 1978).

¹²⁴ John Climacus, *The ladder of divine ascent Vol. 286*, trans., Norman Russel, (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), 64.

to win this war, only then God will intervene and grant us relieve out of pity. Not that we have humbled ourselves because of any virtue we have obtained, but it is because of the mercy of the Lord Himself – nothing more and nothing less. It is only the mercy and the grace of God that takes away from us any wrongdoing. However, like any other virtue, I must pray about this struggle towards chastity. Prayer must be my first step. Show God that you really desire chastity and that you are not just going through the motions. Do not just ask God for chastity because you have been told to, or because it is the right, Christian thing to do, but, desire it from all your heart – to live a pure and chaste life. Then, when God sees your desire, He will give you a hatred for impurity, and you will be able to really aspire towards chastity. What if somebody cannot reach this stage? Some people come to me and say, “I really want to repent but I cannot bring myself to hate this sin. I like it, I love it.” Well, go to God honestly and tell Him about your dilemma. Tell Him that you do love the sin and that you have not developed hatred for this sin yet. Go to Him and say with David the Psalmist, “Create in me a clean heart, O God” (Psalm 51:10).

One of the beautiful prayers of the church is the litany of oblations. We do not hear this prayer often because it is usually prayed in the raising of incense, early in the morning before the liturgy starts. In this litany, we ask God to reward those who desire to offer but have none. We thank God for the offerings that are brought to Him and ask the Lord to reward those who have offered out of their abundance and out of their scarcity, and whatever little that they might bring. We ask God

to reward them, but we also pray to reward those who desire to offer but have none. We want to offer but we have nothing to offer. Maybe we can take our cue from this prayer and to throw ourselves at the feet of the Lord Jesus Christ and say to Him: "Lord, I am one of those people who desire to offer to you but have none. I have no strength in me. I wish I can offer a true desire of purity, but I am unable to." When I humble myself in this way before the Lord, He will grant me my desire – to live a pure life. St Augustine writes about how he experienced this. He did not want to leave sin, he actually used to pray to God and say, "God I want to repent but I have not had my fill of pleasure yet."¹²⁵ He wanted his fill of pleasure, but God caught up with St Augustine, and the man who lived in sin for thirty years became a bishop afterwards. So, there is always hope. But beware of making vows of chastity to the Lord. Do not ever make vows to the Lord because when you promise something you must fulfill it. Rather, ask the Lord to help you into it achieving this chastity or this virtue. Say to him, "Lord I do not want anything to take control over my life. I want You to be the one who is in control of my life." Besides prayer, we must put in a sincere effort in fighting to obtain purity. It does not make any sense, of course, to pray to God and say, "Lord I want purity," when for example I am watching pornography, or giving into evil thoughts without attempting to block them. It does not make sense; it is a contradiction. You see? Do not look for immediate results but do whatever it is that you can, and God will look at your effort and He will grant you your heart's desire. Fight as much as you have power in you, without

¹²⁵ Saint Augustine, *The Confessions*, (UK: Hendrickson Publishers Marketing, LLC, 2004).

worrying about the result. God will look at your effort and He will look at your sincerity and He will give you the results – not in your time but in His time.

I remember during my early days of schooling, our teachers used to give us three different marks on our report card for every subject; a progress mark (this is how you will achieve down the track what you have actually tried to do), an effort mark, and an actual result mark. The teachers used to always say that the most important one out of these three results are the effort, because if you are getting A's for effort, it means that you are putting in your full effort. It means that you cannot do much more than that and this is, I think, also what God looks at. God knows that we are no match for the devil. He knows that the devil will prevail over us, but God wants us to fight courageously, even if we lose at the end. Theophan the Recluse gives a nice analogy, he says, "If a soldier is surrounded by his enemies and goes on fighting until he is seriously wounded in a battle, he is decorated as a hero. But if he sees the enemy around him and raises a white flag and surrenders, he is considered a traitor and is punished accordingly."¹²⁶ The same

¹²⁶ Cf. "This is why, while growth in plants, for example, is a gradual development of faculties-easy, unconstrained-in a Christian it is a battle with oneself involving much labor, intense and sorrowful, and he must dispose his faculties for something for which they have no inclination. Like a soldier, he must take every step of land, even his own, from his enemies by means of warfare, with the double-edged sword of forcing himself and opposing himself. Finally, after long labors and exertions, the Christian principles appear victorious, reigning without opposition; they penetrate the whole composition of human nature, dislodging from it demands and inclinations hostile to themselves, and place it in a state of passionlessness and purity, making it worthy of the blessedness of the pure in heart-to see God in themselves in sincerest communion with Him. Such is the place in us of the Christian life. This life has three stages which may be called: 1) Turning to God; 2) Purification or self-amendment;

scenario applies to our spiritual lives in our pursuit of chastity. If we think that we have lost the battle, God counts even our losses as part of our victory. There is a beautiful story that demonstrates what I am trying to say here in the *Life of Abba Antony the Great*, which was written by St Athanasius the Apostolic. Abba Antony was tempted by the devil in so many ways. The devil used to appear to him in the shape of beasts to frighten him. He used to appear to him in the form of women or gold to tempt him. But Abba Antony resisted all this. The final battle that the devil had with Abba Antony was when he appeared to him in an ugly shape, and he beat him so much to the extent that the saint became unconscious and passed out. When his disciple found him in this state, he carried him to the church in the nearest village, and there, Abba Antony regained his consciousness. He looked up and he saw the ceiling of the church was open and the Lord appeared to him sitting on the throne of His glory. Abba Antony felt sorry for himself and he said to the Lord, "Where have You been, Lord, when the devil was beating me up?" And the Lord answered and said to Him, "I was right beside you Antony, but you were doing so well that I desired to not to intervene, so that you do not lose your reward."¹²⁷ It is a battle. The lord could have stopped Satan then and there, but He allowed him because He did not want Abba Antony to lose his reward in fighting against Satan.

You see, Abba Antony saw defeat in the beating that the devil gave him, but the Lord saw that there was victory worth

3) Sanctification." See, St Theophan the Recluse, *The Path to Salvation: A Manual of Spiritual Transformation*, (Arizona: St Paisius Monastery, 2006), 23.

127 Tim Vivian and Apostolos Athanassakis, trans., *Athanasius of Alexandria. The Life of Anthony: The Coptic Life and the Greek Life*, (Cistercian Publications, 2003).

of reward. The moral of the story is to fight – to keep on fighting and not to worry about the result. Let me just touch briefly about the wiles of the enemy, because I think that if we learn what Satan can tempt us with, and how he can approach us, we might be on guard and ready for his wiles. Like Abba Antony said, “I do not think that the devil tempted me with the same sin twice.” Can you imagine that? He knew where the devil would come to him because he was prepared and learned from being tempted just once. You might resist for a long time, but then you are overcome. Satan suggests to you that since all is lost you might as well indulge more and more, and then try resist later. But this is very wrong. Since you fought with courage, all is not lost – it is never lost, and you have not lost the war. You just were wounded in battle – that is all that happened. Do not give in and wallow in your impurity because this is treason, we can become like traitors then. If you lost while you were fighting you deserve a reward because you fought till the end. To give into the proposals of Satan, that all is lost, is a trap he uses to rob you of the reward that awaits you. Stand up and resume fighting, and do not give into the thoughts of defeat.

The Lord who endured the temptations of the same devil will be able to have pity on you, come to your aid and help you. Do not let Satan say to you, “you have fallen... continue on with what you are doing.” No, keep on fighting. He also has another trick. He suggests to you that since, in the end, you are going to lose anyway, why bother fighting from the beginning? Just give up totally. He tried this with the monks of the desert, but they were so clever and would say, “No. One blow for you and

one blow for me – let us fight this out. If you want to knock me out with one blow then I will have the next blow.”¹²⁸ It is like a boxing match. You try to give your opponent as many blows as you can regardless of how many blows you receive before the time elapses. It is only at the end of the match that you will know the result, not beforehand. Who knows, maybe with one good blow you might knock Satan out.

Satan also has a third trick up his sleeve, that is hindering your repentance. When you fall into sin and feel guilty, and you want to go back to the Lord for forgiveness and for repentance, the devil might rebuke you and say, “How dare you face God to talk to him after what you have done? How dare you stand before God and say to him that you are his son? Wait a few hours or maybe a few days until you are clean, then go and pray. What would your father of confession think when you go and say to him you have done this, or you have done that?” Again, these thoughts need to be stopped and to be resisted straight away, because we must approach God as we are – we must come in our filth, as we are, to God. He is the One who cleanses and replenishes what we have lost. When the prodigal son came to his senses and went back to his father, he went back immediately and with the stench of the swine that

¹²⁸ “Abba Poemen said of Abba John the Dwarf that he had prayed God to take his passions away from him so that he might become free from care. He went and told an old man this: ‘I find myself in peace, without an enemy,’ he said. The old man said to him, ‘Go, beseech God to stir up warfare so that you may regain the affliction and humility that you used to have, for it is by warfare that the soul makes progress.’ So he besought God and when warfare came, he no longer prayed that it might be taken away, but said, ‘Lord, give me strength for the fight.’” John Wortley, *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, (St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2014), 134.

he had been living with (Luke 15:18). He did not clean himself and say, "I need to be pure before I go back to my father." No, he went back as he was, in his filthy clothes, and it was his father that gave him the clean robe to put on. The father will never despise the stench of sin when we come back to Him in repentance because the Lord is overcome by love towards those who return to Him. Christ says that, "there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance" (Luke 15:7). This is how much the Lord loves those who come back to Him in repentance. Look at what the father did to this prodigal son. He ran to him, embraced him, fell on his neck and kissed him, even though his son had the stench of sin all over him. This is our position with God. When I come back to Him, He will also accept me as I am.

There is an Orthodox monk by the name of Fr Lev Gillette and is very well known for his spiritual writings. He wrote this beautiful saying: "You must be certain that in the same moment you are committing sin, that God loves you."¹²⁹ The devil might suggest otherwise – but he is a liar. So, as soon as you fall, immediately get on your knees before your loving

¹²⁹ "The ethic of Limitless Love demands that we should be able to recognize the presence of God in the very sin that the sinner commits... You must not think I mean that God approves of the sin or encourages the sinner. I simply mean that even in an act of sin God is, to a certain extent, present... everything that happens—the bad act as well as the good—has its roots in the being of God. Only because God gives us our being (or rather lends it to us) are we in existence at the very moment when we commit a sin. At that very moment God could withdraw our being from us, could destroy us. But he holds us in the existence we have received from him, even when that existence turns against him. Moreover, the Lord's Love, in his infinite mercy, allows sin to contain certain positive elements." See, Fr Lev Gillette, *The Burning Bush*, (USA: Templegate, 1976), 48-49.

Father and tell him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants,” (Luke 15:18-19). Immediately you will feel the embrace of God the Father and His loving-kindness towards you, that He will accept you back. Go back to Him with courage and know that the Lord will never return a sinner who comes to Him in repentance. It is that your repentance between you and God does not cancel out, in any way, your physical confession before your confession father. We call it the sacrament of repentance and confession. This means that there is repentance between you and the Lord, but then there is also the completion of the sacrament by the actual physical confession before my confession father.

Another trick that Satan will use is making you doubt God’s forgiveness. He might say to you, “How many times have you done this? How many times have you fallen? Do you think that God will continue to accept you every time you go back to Him? Is it a game? Do you think that He will be there waiting for you?” The answer is yes. God will continue to accept us no matter how many times it happens. When St Peter the Apostle asked the Lord how many times he should forgive his brother every day, he was told “seventy times seven” (Matthew 18:22). I do not think that the Lord actually meant a literal calculation of four-hundred and ninety times a day, but I think the Lord was indicating that no matter how many times your brother sins against you, you must forgive him daily. Will Christ not also give us the same chance if He is asking us to forgive one another seven times seventy in one day? Will He not give us that same forgiveness? The all-loving and merciful God will

give us even more forgiveness. When you are tempted by Satan, and he says to you, “how many times will you do this and keep going to God?” Reply to him with the beautiful verse from the book of Micah, which has some encouraging words. It says, “Do not rejoice over me, my enemy; when I fall, I will arise; when I sit in darkness, the LORD will be a light to me” (Micah 7:8). Try to memorise that reference and to learn that verse.

A lay person went into a monastery and he asked one of the monks a strange question. He said to the monk, “What makes you (monks) different from us who live in the world?” The monk answered very simply and said, “We fall then we rise up, then we fall again and then we rise up, and then we fall again, and we rise up.” You see, we are all in the same boat. It does not matter what pathway I choose to live my life; we are all on the same road of salvation. Do not ever grieve over your falls by ‘over- grieving.’ We know that this is a sign of pride when you over grieve your faults. It means that you are losing hope and losing trust in the Lord. Now, consider this as a remedy that was sent to you by God to teach you humility. Defeat with humility is better than victory with pride. St Isaac the Syrian also says something very nice along these lines, he says, “Some please God by their virtues, others by their contrite and broken heart.”¹³⁰ So, even if you fall into sin and you show a contrite and a broken heart, this is pleasing to God. Unfortunately, we get discouraged because we have been trying for a long time without success. As humans, we are always looking for quick answers or a quick success. However, be aware that to gain

¹³⁰ Cf. Hilarion Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World Of Isaac The Syrian*, (USA: Liturgical Press, 2016), 111-128.

chastity, you need to gain it in a proper way. Our pursuit for chastity is not just for a moment or two, or for a short period of time or even a long period of time. Chastity will go with you your whole life, if you are working towards it in a proper way. At least for somebody like me, it might take longer than others, but there is nothing wrong with taking longer than others. Does it matter who gets there first? The important thing is that we all get there, and we all get there safely. So, we need to continue fighting, even if it is for fourteen years, like Mother Sarah's fight – it does not matter. Even if it is for forty years! But at the end of time, then we can all stand before the Lord and to say, "Thank you, Lord for granting me Your mercy to be able to reach this virtue of chastity."

Sometimes, you can even trick the devil. Like the monk who used to get very hungry and was tempted to break his fast. He used to say to himself, "I will only pray two more times before I eat." He would pray two more times and he would say, "No, just two more times then I will break my fast and eat." Then he will continue his song and say, "maybe one more song, then I will break my fast and eat." He goes on doing this and suddenly, he breaks this trap of hunger that Satan brought upon him, and the devil gives up on the monk and goes away and finds somebody else. The devil does not have much patience for those who are stern in thinking because he will find some other easy target, and then this monk would find that he has done his cannon without breaking his fast early. It is the same with you and I. For example, if I am being fought and urged to sin, I can say to myself "let me sleep tonight in comfort and in the wisdom of my Father in Heaven and let us

see what happens tomorrow.” When I calm my thoughts and my body in that way, the morning will come and maybe no sin will happen. I have instead gained a great virtue by even being patient in my pursuit of the virtue of chastity. You see, when I postpone my falling and then I have become maybe somewhat exhausted, then the Lord's mercy enters and covers for my weaknesses. Then I can continue in my fight in the new day. I can see the day through and say with the Psalmist, “Weeping may endure for a night, but joy *comes* in the morning” (Psalm 30:5). When the fight is tough, I can push myself just a little bit more and see what gains I can achieve. Believe it or not, you will achieve so much.

Finally, to conclude, I just want to share a beautiful segment by Abbott Chaeremon. It talks about what we should do when God grants us chastity. I am not gaining a virtue just for the sake of virtue – everything must be for the glory of God. He says: “One who has a quiet chastity should rejoice at the purity that has been bestowed upon him and should understand that he has acquired it, not by his own effort and vigilance, but by the protection of the Lord. And he should understand that his body will persevere in this as long as the Lord mercifully permits it.”¹³¹ It is not my own effort. I will persist in this chastity if the Lord mercifully permits it. He continues to say, “He should never trust in his own virtue, nor be weakened by a flattering sense of security, knowing that he will be solid or become dirty again if the Divine protection departs from him for a little while. Therefore, in all contrition and humility of heart, one must pray continually for perseverance in this purity.” This is a beautiful virtue; chastity.

¹³¹ Boniface Ramsey, trans., *John Cassian: The Conferences, Ancient Christian Writers 57* (USA: Paulist Press, 1997), 151-156.

“Imitate the publican, and you will not be condemned with the Pharisee. Choose the meekness of Moses and you will find your heart which is a rock changed into a spring of water.”

*Amma Synceltica*¹³²

8.7

Meekness & Discernment

The virtue of meekness

The Apostle tells us that meekness is one of the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). We are all called to live by this virtue of meekness. The beautiful example of this virtue is in our Lord Jesus Christ Himself. He teaches us meekness by saying to us, “Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and meek in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light” (Matthew 11:29-30). How can we imitate the meekness of our Lord Jesus Christ?

Isaiah prophesied in times of old about the Lord Jesus Christ saying, “He will not cry out, nor raise His voice, nor cause His voice to be heard in the street. A bruised reed He will not break, and smoking flax He will not quench; He will bring

¹³² John Wortley, *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, (St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2014), 305.

forth justice for truth” (Isaiah 42:2-3). The image that we have now of our Lord is somebody who is very quietly spoken, who is peaceful in dealing with others, whose voice is not heard, and does not raise his voice. In other words, someone who has a subdued anger, not showing any anger whatsoever. We see this clearly in the life of our Lord Jesus Christ here on earth. Even in the most difficult times, He would not rebuke in anger, would not raise His voice, and He would not show any signs of anger at all.

We are exhorted by St. Paul the Apostle who says, “If it is possible, as much as depends on you live peaceably with all men” (Romans 12:18). This whole concept of anger then needs to be treated by us as Christians because anger has become a real and serious problem in our society. It is a problem for all ages, we find little children who are very angry and outrageous in their anger. There are things like road rage or flight rage, sometimes even without any reason, you know. And you wonder why people are so angry on the inside. Even things like movies or TV shows, or even computer games, and even cartoons, to some extent, might have things like violence in them, which causes the person to become angry. No wonder anger management courses have become a big business.

Let us have a look at what degrees of meekness there is considering what the fathers teach us. These are degrees of meekness the Lord actually spoke about in one of the most beautiful parables that we have in the scripture, and that is the parable of the sower that says, “But others fell on good ground and yielded a crop: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty” (Matthew 13:8). These are the degrees of meekness.

The first degree of meekness is not to repay evil with evil. This is the lowest form of meekness, and St Paul urges us, "Repay not evil for evil" (Romans 12:17). St Peter tells us something similar: "Not returning evil for evil, or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary blessing, knowing that you were called to this, that you may have inherited a blessing" (1 Peter 3:9). Again, our Lord is a perfect example of this, Who it has been said about Him, "Who when He was reviled, did not revile in return. When He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously" (1 Peter 2:23).

The second degree of meekness is to accept the insult without losing your internal peace. I can withhold from repaying evil for evil. But now to accept the insult without losing my inner calmness and inner peacefulness is more difficult. Some people can refrain from repaying evil for evil but on the inside, they might be boiling with anger, and are desirous for revenge. The thoughts of anger might perplex them. By their internal desire for revenge, these people have fallen short of that second degree of meekness. There is a beautiful story about St John the Short who was very well known in his time. Many people came to hear him. But another monk was very envious of his fame. One day Abba John was sitting down in Scetis, and the brethren came to him to ask him about their thoughts. One of the elders said, "John, you are like a prostitute who shows her beauty to increase the number of her lovers." Abba John kissed him and said, "You are quite right, Father." One of his disciples said to him, "Do you not mind that in your heart?" But he said,

“No, I am the same inside as I am outside.”¹³³ In meekness, humility, and lowliness, he felt that he was deserving of this. There is also another beautiful story that shows us how this meekness was achieved by the desert fathers. The story goes by telling us that some monks from Syria, hearing about the fame of the Egyptian monks in the desert, came to the Egyptian monasteries to see how these monks conducted themselves. It was the custom of the Egyptian monks to eat early whenever they had visitors come to them in order not to enforce a sense of ‘pharisaic rite’ on the visitors that came. For example, we hear about the beautiful story of one of the elders who had visitors, so he asked his disciples to set for them a meal. And they ate of the meal with him because of hospitality. As the custom was, that the monks would go out in the evening and walk in the desert, and then his disciple became thirsty after they had eaten of the meal with their guests, and he went to drink, and the elder rebuked him, “What happened to our fasting? What happened to our abstinence?” The disciples replied, “But we just ate a meal with our guest.” He said, “This was for the sake of hospitality. But this does not break our custom in terms of abstaining and of keeping our fast.” When the table was set, and the Syrian monks sat with the Egyptian monks, the Syrian monks started to think in their mind that these Egyptian monks are quite lax, they break their fast at the ninth hour (equivalent to three o’clock in the afternoon), whereas they, in Syria, they keep the fast until much later, until sunset at least. The abbot, through the Spirit knew what the other monks were thinking.

¹³³ John Wortley, *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, (St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2014), 143.

And the story goes on to show that there was an old monk giving out bread to those who were eating. When this old monk came to give the bread to the abbot, the abbot raised his hand and slapped him across the face quite harshly. But this old monk continued to give out the bread without any change in his outer appearance of calmness and peacefulness. The Syrian monks realised that they are lacking something that they have come and found in the Egyptian monks. They prostrated themselves before the abbot and said to him, "Forgive us, for we can persevere without food longer, but we cannot control our passions the way you do." Again, the second degree of meekness is to accept the insult without losing your inner peace.

The third degree of meekness is the person who, when they are insulted, feel grieved that they have caused the brother or sister to sin against them. How do we attain this? We need to turn to prayer first and foremost and have the guidance of our spiritual fathers. I need to ask the Lord directly, "Lord, teach me to be meek like you" or "Lord, you have long hid and run from me for I am meek. Teach me this meekness that I can find rest unto my soul as you have promised." Resorting to prayer and the guidance of my confession father, the next step would be to reason within ourselves and to think of it in this way: that inner peace is a gift from the Lord Jesus Christ who said, "Peace I leave with you, My peace I give unto you" (John14:27). Every time I give into anger, I am losing my peace. I am losing a precious gift that Christ has handed to me personally. If I take this gift from Christ and throw it away, I will be refusing this precious gift. Imagine how you would feel if someone special

to you gave you a gift, and you throw it away. How much more so then if it is the gift of Christ Himself?

Do not be get angry because then the gift of Christ is thrown away. Once I have put this disposition firmly in my mind, I need to carry on with the exercise. The first thing you do in the morning is that after you have said your prayers, review in your mind, all the situations that may arise that may lead you to lose your peace during that day. Imagine the worst-case scenario that you can possibly imagine in your own mind. Then ask yourself, “what if this happens? Am I going to throw away the precious gift of Christ of his peace or not?” You will find in that the answer is an emphatic *no*, because you do not want to lose this precious gift. Resolve in your mind that no matter how bad things get during the day that you will not be disturbed, and your inner peace will not be taken away from you. To be confirmed in a state of meekness and internal peace can only be reached if we follow through with even a further step.

The Gospel of Matthew tells us, “Pray for those who despitefully use you and persecute you” (Matthew 5:44). Nothing confirms the peace of Christ in our heart like praying for those who hate you or want to hurt you. Believe me, it does work because God’s words are not in vain. He does not tell us lies; His words are true. His words give life. If you do this with zeal, then you can reach the level and the state of loving even your enemies. We find that commandment is very difficult. How can I love a person who wants to hurt me, a person who wants to use me, a person who wants to abuse me? But loving your enemy can only come through our love for the Lord Jesus

Christ and through his commandments. People who have taken this admonition seriously have been rewarded with everlasting peace. Nobody can ever take away the peace of the God in a ones heart.

There was a young Christian man Egypt who was in a high position in a large organisation. Being a Christian in Egypt can sometimes be difficult, especially if you hold a high position. People look out for you wanting to get rid of you very quickly. His boss was the vice president of the company that was very fanatic and wanted to get rid of him because he was a Christian. He made it his goal to do whatever he can to get rid of this Christian person, and for many years, he conspired to frame him in one way or another, to set him up with a crime to get rid of him. Many times, the police would come and investigate anonymous complaints that were made against this Christian person to only find that he is innocent of all the allegations. At one time, even the police chief who was not a Christian said, "Someone around here wants to really harm you. You need to be careful. Someone around here has put a bounty on your head to have you killed." Throughout this whole ordeal, the young man kept praying for this vice president that was persecuting him. Every time he opened his Bible, he would find Matthew 5:44 which clearly reminded him, "Pray for those who despitefully use you and persecute you." So, he continued to pray. At first, he was praying for this man by his lips, not by heart. He felt obliged that he had to fulfil the commandment one way or another. But then as time went on, he started to pray for this man with his whole heart, that one day he was called into the office by the president of the company. He said to the Christian, "I know what you have been going through.

And I have fired the vice president because of the persecution that he had made you face.”

The man was miserable. He did not rejoice at this. He did not think that this was a win for him. He felt that this poor man (the vice president) was probably doing the will of God in his own mind. He did not know any better. He likened him in his prayers to Saul of Tarsus, who used to take the Christians and put them to death, thinking that he is doing a favour to God. As the Scripture tells us, “they will put you out of the synagogues; yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service” (John16:2). He started to pray for this man, and he felt miserable that this man is out of a job. How will his family cope? How will his children manage? And he kept praying for this man, even though he knew that now he had been fired from the company. Imagine this amazing level that a person can reach. This is a true image of a meek person.

I suppose we cannot say attaining this level of meekness is impossible because the Lord Himself did it. When He was struck by the servant of the high priest, he said to him, “why did you strike me, friend?” (John 18:23). He called him friend. His reply shows us that when you are unmoved in that way, when you maintain your peace, you are sending a very clear message to the person who is striking. You are bringing their anger down so that way you can communicate with them on a different level. There is nothing easier than a person to lose their control and be angry in return. What will that make the other person do? Become even more angry. Even the Lord's reply shows us that we need to control that anger and I think this is what the Lord meant when he said, “If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn the other” (Luke 6:29).

Remember that the side of the cheek that has not been hurt is the side that still has goodness in it. One side is ringing with hurt, because it has been struck, the other side is still not hurt. Show the good side, show the unhurt side. I suppose without the presence of Christ, there is no way I am going to be able to achieve this. It is not easy at all, but it is achievable only with the presence of Christ. Do not forget He is the Prince of Peace. So, if He does not exist in my life then definitely there is no way that I am going to be able to have this virtue of meekness that was first perfected in Christ.

But you too, my friend, can have this unshakeable peace in your heart if you take seriously the command of the Scripture and to exercise them diligently. Let me conclude this segment of meekness with some very beautiful words by St John Climacus:¹³⁴

1. Meekness is an unchangeable state of mind, which remains the same in honour and dishonour.
2. Meekness consists in praying calmly and sincerely for a troublesome neighbour.
3. Meekness is a rock overlooking the sea of irritability, which breaks all the waves that dash against it yet remains completely unmoved.
4. Meekness is the buttress of patience, the door, or rather, the mother of love, and the foundations of discernment, for it is said: "The Lord will teach the

¹³⁴ Archimandrite Lazarus Moore, *John Climacus: The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, (Boston: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 2001), 145-146.

meek His way.” It prepares us for the forgiveness of sins; it is boldness in prayer, an abode of the Holy Spirit. But to whom shall I look? Even to him that is meek and quiet.

The virtue of discernment

To be able to know right from wrong, good from evil, what the will of God is, to discern the spirits whether the spirit is from the Lord or an evil spirit requires spiritual discipline. We are commanded to have this spirit of discernment when we are told by St John in his epistle, “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, batiste spirits whether they are from God” (1 John 4:1). Also, remember Solomon as wise when he became king, the Lord said to him, “Whatever you request it will be yours” (cf. 2 Chronicles 1:11). He said to the Lord, “Therefore gift your servant an understanding, how to judge your people that I may discern between good and evil” (1 King 3:9). Because Solomon was asking for this virtue, the Lord gave him this virtue and everything else as well.

Abba Antony the Great ranks discernment as the virtue that should be sought after more than any other virtue, because if you attain any other virtue without discernment, then you are prone to lose it. For example, with relation to the virtue of chastity, imagine if a person cannot discern whether a spirit is coming from Satan or from the Lord. Then they might lose the virtue of chastity.

We are bombarded by thoughts every moment of our life. The fathers classify the thoughts into three origins. 1) Thoughts can come from the self. We are told in Psalm 94

the Lord knows the thoughts of man, that they are futile. 2) Thoughts can also be from God or from the Holy Spirit who abides in us. We are told in the Gospel, "But when they deliver you want, do not worry about how or what you should speak for it will be given to you in that hour what you should speak. For it is not you who speak but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you" (Matthew 10:19). 3) Finally, thoughts can come from the devil. In the Gospel, we are told that after supper had ended, the devil having already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray Christ (John 13:2). Similarly, St Peter said to Ananias, "Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit, and to keep back part of the price of the land for yourself?" (Acts 5:3) Discerning then the origin of our thoughts can be very difficult. Sometimes a thought can change very quickly. It could be one thought coming from God and immediately be followed by another thought coming from Satan.

For example, the story in the Gospel of Matthew says, "Simon Peter answered and said, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.' And Jesus answered and said to him, 'Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father in heaven.' But the time came when the Lord started to show his disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and the chief priests and be killed and be raised on the third day. But Peter took the Lord aside, and began to rebuke the Lord saying, 'Far be it from you, Lord, this shall not happen to You.' The Lord turned to Simon Peter and said to him, 'Get behind Me, Satan, for you are an offence to me. For you are not mindful of the

things of God, but the things of men” (Matthew 16:16-23). Simon Peter had the two thoughts, one after the other: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God”, and immediately after, “far be it that you should suffer and be put to death”. Of course, here He is not referring to St Peter as Satan, but He is saying that this thought has come from Satan. See, the dwelling of the Holy Spirit gives us the spirit of discernment. And although the Bible exhorts us to test the spirits whether are from God or not, we are not given an exact method of how to discern these thoughts. In this case, we need to turn to the desert fathers and seek their experience in order to know how to discern thoughts.

First, we examine the thought to see whether it is filled with the fear of God. Is it filled with goodness towards others? Does it agree with the witness and actions of the Lord and the apostles in scripture? This is a pretty hard thought process if you think of it. For every thought, I must ask these questions. Some of the desert fathers wondered whether the thought evoked peace and tranquillity, or whether it was surrounded by anger, bitterness, and turmoil?¹³⁵ The most pious thoughts should be distrusted if they deprive us of our inner peace. You should not trust it even if it is the most pious of thoughts, because they deprive us of our inner peace. Many times, are we led to believe that we are being moved by the zeal of the Lord when we are succumbing to anger or condemnation etc. We must be very careful how we discern our thoughts.

¹³⁵ E.g., Abba Agathon: “Whenever his thoughts urged him to pass judgement on something which he saw, he would say to himself, ‘Agathon, it is not your business to do that.’ Thus his spirit was always recollected.” John Wortley, *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, (St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2014), 57.

And this can happen time and time again, without relenting because these thoughts are unrelenting.

Here is an example of how God speaks to us and how we should discern what these thoughts are like. God wanted to talk to Elijah the prophet: “That a great and a strong wind tore into the mountains and broke the rocks and pieces before the Lord. But the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind, an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake, a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire and after the fire, a still small voice, a still small voice” (1 Kings 19:11-12). You see, a thought that is surrounded by feelings of pride, stubbornness, selfishness, or even confusion and anxiety, has no peace and cannot be from God. Thoughts that are from God fill us with serenity and with joy, and even with humility.

Does a thought come with a sense of urgency about it? Do you feel compelled to do it right away? If so, then be very careful because most probably, these are from Satan rather than from God. If it were from God, the intuitions of the Holy Spirit will come to the soul gradually and gently and not impulsively. The person thinks, meditates, and takes time in order to find the right result. Abba Macarius the Great (+391) had a thought to go and visit the monks in the surrounding area. He kept this thought and examined it for two years before he acted on it. He wanted to be certain that it was not from the devil. If we give every thought two years, the process will be very long!

The five questions we need to ask ourselves that help us examine our thoughts and whether they are filled with the fear of God are:

1. Is it filled with goodness towards everyone?
2. Does it agree with the witness and actions of the Lord and the scripture and the apostles?
3. Does the thought evoke peace and tranquillity?
4. Is it surrounded by anger, bitterness, and turmoil?
5. Does the thought come with a sense of urgency?

You may do all these steps mentioned here, but sometimes the devil can trick you to fall. The most important test of whether the thought is coming to you is to reveal your thought to your confession father - no matter how small you think the thoughts are. The father's value is more than anything else in discerning the thoughts. For example, Abba Moses the Black used to reveal his thoughts to one of his disciples by the name of Zacharias who was only 18 years old, but he was filled with the Holy Spirit.¹³⁶

When you do not trust in your own thoughts, and reveal them to one another, then literally *two heads are better than one*. I always say to married couples during the crowning ceremony when we place their heads together that it is symbolic of the couple becoming 'one mind'. Both minds working together to become one. No head is above another. No thought is above another. Do not belittle the thought of the

¹³⁶ Brother Zacharius was highly looked upon by both Abba Macarius and Abba Moses: "Going to draw water one day, Abba Moses found brother Zacharias praying beside the well and the spirit of God rested above him." John Wortley, *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2014), 109-110.

other but think and discuss together because when you do that, you disallow Satan to work against you. They are both on the same journey and are helping each other.

What about then discerning the will of God. We all want to know the will of God for our life. Sometimes we get into a situation where we are unable to decide. For example, you might be accepted into two different universities to two different courses. What do you choose? One might be in your local city or hometown, the other might be out of town and or interstate or overseas. What do you do? Or, you have a job and then you get another offer for another job that is interstate or overseas. What do you do? I think in these situations, it is then when we want to know the will of God. And we begin seeking the will of God.

But why is it important for me to know the will of God?

St Paul says, “The will of God is good, acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2). It lacks nothing. It satisfies my spiritual, physical, psychological, and emotional needs. God knows the future much more so than what we know for ourselves. My own will, on the other hand, is anything but perfect. How many times have we wanted certain things for ourselves, and later find that they are not suitable for us? How many times have people who are still spiritually not mature, thought of things that would make them happy, and find that these things are in vain? If I wanted to consider what was good for me long term, I should not rely then on my own will which is imperfect, but I should rely on the will of God. So that is why the will of God is important.

Now, how can I know the will of God? Theophan the Recluse tells us that for God to reveal his good, acceptable, and perfect will for me, I must renounce my own self-will.¹³⁷ That is the first important step. We say in the Lord's prayer, "Your will be done on earth as it is in Heaven" (Matthew 6:10). Even the Lord Himself when He was in the Garden of Gethsemane, He said to God, the Father, "Let it be thy will, not my will" (Matthew 26:36-46). He submitted to the will of God, the Father. Sometimes we ask God to reveal His will, but we have already made up our mind on the inside: "Lord, this is what I want, and I hope that it is Your will." I am forcing God to say, "Okay, there you go, here it is, because this is what you want." And if we act in this way, then God will not reveal His will to us because God is not going to force us to do one thing or another. He will not force His will upon us. We must accept it willingly and without our own self-will coming into the equation. Theophan the Recluse gives us this beautiful analogy about this. He says that if you have a glass full of vinegar, and you want to put honey into this glass, you first must throw away the vinegar. Then you must wash the glass, put it out in the sun for a few hours, until the smell of the vinegar disappears, then you can put the honey into it. He says that the vinegar here is our own will, selfish and short sighted, because it is unlike the will of God – it is not perfect; it is not good; it is not acceptable.¹³⁸ The honey is the will of God. If only we can just know what the will of God is for us. It will be so much more precious. Unless we bury our own self will then God will not

¹³⁷ St Theophan the Recluse, *The Path to Salvation: A Manual of Spiritual Transformation*, (Arizona: St Paisius Monastery, 2006).

¹³⁸ St Theophan the Recluse, *The Path to Salvation: A Manual of Spiritual Transformation*, (Arizona: St Paisius Monastery, 2006).

reveal His will to us. We will be mocking God by asking Him to reveal His will while our own will has already been made up, and that cannot work. How can I really do this?

There is an exercise the fathers called used known as the *neutralisation of will*. It is the bias I will always have either for or against anything that I am considering. For example, if I get an offer for a job that might give me more money, I might lean toward this job and become blind to any other aspect because I want more money. I might face a situation where I am asked to accept something that I do not like which makes me overlook its many good features. All these likes and dislikes, I suppose, are based on first impressions for us as humans. Imagine you have been accepted into a good university in your hometown. You have an offer from another university that is far from home. This is more suited maybe to younger people. The lure of freedom plays a big role here, does it not? "Wow. No more mom and dad." No more, "Have you studied? You are late for college." The lure of freedom here overwrites everything else, and there might be many other factors that they are not considering because this "beautiful freedom" is at arms-length. It is here that I need to balance my thoughts by saying, "Well, what about my family and friends? What about my church? What about important things to me like my confession father?" When a person begins to consider all the aspects, I think the thought process becomes so much easier. To do that, a person must neutralise their own will in order to be able to think like that. But, if you see something that you really want, most of the time we are blinded to everything else. It is wrong. And of course, these other aspects are true, but

they are ignored because of this “freedom” or sense of want without the proper scrutiny. That is why it's important to neutralise our will. Know that all possibilities are possible for you. Do not take a decision to dispatch until you have thought this out through Word of God.

The second step then after the neutralisation of will, is to go to my father in confession, to ask him, and to pray together, that God may reveal His good, perfect, and acceptable will. This act of submitting our souls to our father in confession is an act of humility. It is a very prerequisite for God to reveal His will to us because you are having someone else pray with you. Imagine that there is more than one person praying about an issue? Surely, God's will can be revealed in that regard. If you feel afraid, that God may choose an option for you that is not in your favour, then you have not done your homework properly. You may feel upset with what God has chosen for you. You have not neutralised your will. Your will still desires to overwrite God's will. Neutralisation here means that there is absolutely no favour towards one thing over another. God may choose the option that you have favoured for yourself, and that is fine. But the beauty about doing this exercise is that every time you are faced with the same situation, you know to go back and use same routine. It means that you are saying to God, “Lord, I do not want to have any say in this. I want it to be your say.” It is easier said than done. However, there are some words of caution.

Do not try to cheat when you are thinking this process through Don't say, “Lord, I am definitely going to submit to Your will” only just to be hurt and to feel like, “Why is God

doing this to me?" It does not work like that. Asking God to really reveal to you what He wants to do. When you accept the will of God, in the most difficult of circumstances, you will find the most inner peace that you have ever experienced.

I mentioned that some people can accept the will of God in certain aspects of the life, but not other things. For example, I had a young woman one time who said that she will accept the will of God in anything except for marriage and when I asked, "Why marriage?" She said, "This is my personal choice. I do not want God to choose for me, I want to choose." I said, "But God can choose for you what is good, what is much better than what you will choose for yourself?" And she said something very strange. She said, "I do not want the boring Sunday school teacher or a deacon that is not going to be fun." I said, "Yes, but God can choose for you a deacon or servant who is also fun to live with." I think this is cutting God short. God can choose for you so much more than you think for yourself. Another young man who came to attend a retreat said to me that when it comes to marriage, "I want to be the master of my own destiny." But then one of the servants that was there, answered and said in a very nice reply, "If you ignore the will of God in the process of choosing your partner and your spouse, you will become the master of your own disaster, not the master of your own destiny." If we keep God out of the choices we make, then we are looking for trouble. It is like a person who is in a boat, and they need to do some hard work, but they also need to give the rudder to the control of Christ. They say, "Lord, you direct where the boat will go." Unfortunately, many times we insist on holding the rudder ourselves and we want God to do

the rowing. We want him to do the hard work and to make the final decision for us. It should not work like that.

One benefit of accepting the will of God as your preferred option is that whatever comes your way or whatever God allows to come your way, you will have no fear because it is His choice. To know that God has willed this for me, gives us that inner comfort and inner peace that we are living under His guidance and direction. Let me conclude with the words of St John Cassian, “We will most easily come to a precise knowledge of true discernment if we follow the paths of our elders, if we do nothing new and free, do not presume to decide anything on the basis of our own private judgement. Instead, let us in all things travel the road laid down for us by the tradition of our elders and by the goodness of their lives. Strengthened by this routine, a person will not only reach the summit of discernment but will remain completely safe from all the snares of the enemy.”¹³⁹

¹³⁹ Ramsey Boniface, trans., *John Cassian: The Conferences*, (USA: Paulist Press, 1997), 70.

“The whole life of a man is but
one single day for those who are
working hard with longing.”

St Gregory the Theologian¹⁴⁰

On the occasion of the last
liturgy prayed by Fr Macarius at
St Mary’s Coptic Orthodox Church
on Sunday the 2nd of August 2020

9

Lazarus Come Forth

“For your sake we are killed all day long, we
are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.”
(Psalm 44:22)

Temptations, trials, difficulties, or tribulations in the life of the children of God, uncovers the depth of love that the Lord has towards us, and the depth of love that we have toward Him as well. It is like a push to make us hang on to His love to the end. The Holy Bible says to us, “so when He heard that Lazarus was sick, He stayed two more days in a place where He was” (John 11:6). We would have expected that the Lord would have hurried to the house

¹⁴⁰ John Wortley, *Give Me a Word: The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, (St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2014), 83.

of Lazarus and Martha and Mary, but instead, He waits two more days. It may appear to us that the Lord does not care about us. In many instances we are so limited in our thinking and we make our goal so often confined to very narrow limits. Sometimes we are like little children, forgive me to say, even like little spoiled children, to seek an immediate short-term solution to our problems and to our difficulties.

The petition of the two sisters was also mainly confined just to the healing of their brother in terms of his bodily sickness. There was no long-term plan that they had envisaged, but the Lord has a different goal. The first reason is that this sickness is for the Glory of the Father. This sickness is not unto death, but for the Glory of God. The Lord said to Martha, "Did I not say to you that if you would believe, you would see the Glory of God" (John 11:40). Sometimes our Lord plans and arranges the time in which to show the Glory of God, and this could be so different to our own timing, arrangement, and preparation. At the right time, the Lord will reveal the Glory of God, in whatever difficulties we might be facing.

The second goal of the Lord was not just the Glory of the Father, but also the goal of the Lord was to increase the faith of those who were witnessing or attending at that time, because He makes all things happen for the good of those who love God (Romans 8:28). Imagine if the Lord had just simply healed the sickness of Lazarus. How many people may not have believed in the Lord because of this great miracle of raising a person who had been dead for four days, with a stench coming out of the grave?

The third goal is that He was aiming to proclaim the power of the Resurrection for each and every one of us. This would

not have happened if He had simply healed the sickness of Lazarus. In Christ the power of the Resurrection for all of us is declared, and we can stand against the enemy of death that had much power over humanity. Now the Christian person no longer fears death, but they see death as a mere departure to a better place. They see it like a change of address, and life in Christ becomes a permanent residence for them – a life-eternal.

When they had taken away the stone from the tomb, and a foul smelling of deadness had come out of the tomb, the Lord with these beautiful, yet mighty words, says to Lazarus, “Lazarus come forth” (John 11:43). He who had died, came out bound, hand and foot, and with grave clothes and his face wrapped with a cloth. Who can perceive Your word Lord and remain dead? Of course, these powerful words of our Lord Jesus Christ that proceed out of His pure mouth, bring us to life and these are what He calls to each one of us. Rather than Lazarus, He puts your name and my name, and He says, “come forth and come forth now.” We need to cry out to Him and to say, “Lord bring my soul out of prison”, as David said in time of old (Psalm 142:7). You see my dear friend, it is only at the word of the Lord that we are given life, and given life eternal, and given abundant life at that, as well. That is why the Lord commanded that they unbind him and let him go.

Am I not then another Lazarus that is also in need of these pure words of the Lord? I am. I am just like Lazarus who has been now dead in a grave for four days. In need of these powerful words of the Lord to bring me out of the grave of sin. I am in need to have my eyes opened again because they had lived in the darkness of life. I am in need for the Lord to say to

me come forth and be distant from your old way of thinking, from your old way of behaviour, from the mind that used to not think about anything except futile matters. Now, he gives me a new mouth, a new tongue, that can utter holy words, rather than words that are only suitable for worldly matters. He is saying now come forth and let your heart be a new heart that is now full of love. No longer does it remain a heart full of malice, envy, enmity, or anxiousness.

Come forth and let your hands now be unwrapped, to be free and lifted in prayer, pure holy prayer to the Lord once more. Come out and allow your feet that had been bound, to walk in the way of the Lord, and do good, and to no longer walk in the way of dispute and worry. The Lord is changing now my whole life because of the Resurrection, from a life that had a stench, to a life of purity, to a life of righteousness, but it is only to those who are seeking and hearing the words of the Lord.

Lord, I long for those loving words, and say to me come forth, come out of this deadness, to a new life, to a life eternal. The Lord is also saying to each one of us, loose him and let him go, not only to do that for ourselves but also for others. To bring others out of this binding grave cloth, to make them live again.

May the Lord grant us that His reviving word brings us to life, and that the grace of the resurrection from the death of our sins, to grant us life and to grant us abundant life and life eternal. May the Lord grant us continually to live the power of the Resurrection.



THE SPIRITUAL WORDS OF FR MACARIUS WAHBA

A COLLECTION OF HOMILIES

Fr Macarius' service was distinguished with humility and utmost simplicity. He was the type of servant who made you feel at ease. He was always content, preferring not to impose his opinion on anyone. He never sought worldly glory, rather, he avoided the limelight and chose the lowliest place. He preferred to hide behind the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

"Always breathe Christ" were the words of Abba Antony that inspired Fr Macarius' homiletical approach. It was his solemn silence that attracted people to his wisdom, love, and Christ-like eminence. His spiritual advice was simple and practical because he was both of those things.

This book, by no coincidence, begins with the first sermon Fr Macarius delivered as a priest titled, "Let not your heart be troubled" and his final sermon before his passing titled, "Lazarus, come forth".

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