

PARADISE OF THE SPIRIT

By

Bishop Youanis

**Late Bishop of Gharbia
EGYPT**

Part Two

Second Edition

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Second Edition

- 1. Prayer**
- 2. Fasting**
- 3. Almsgiving**
- 4. Spiritual Readings**
- 5. The Holy Bible**
- 6. Spiritual Exercises**
- 7. Retreat**
- 8. Service**

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(Picture of)
Saint Mark the Apostle

Founder of the Coptic Church of Egypt

(Picture of)

**His Holiness Pope Shenouda III
117th Pope of Alexandria
Patriarch of the See of St. Mark**

(Picture of)

**Anba Youanis
Late Bishop of Province of Gharbia**

Tanta, Egypt

FOREWORD

Bishop Youanis wrote over 20 books in Egypt in the Arabic Language between 1960 and 1987 when he rested in the Lord. These books are considered a great wealth to the Coptic (Egyptian) Orthodox Church and indeed to the whole Christian Church. The first of these books is "Paradise of the Spirit" which he wrote in three parts.

Part 1 of "Paradise of the Spirit" deals with the 'Life of Repentance' and contains 11 chapters on: Repentance, Confession, Communion, Humility, Pride, Honor, Purity, Anger, Speaking Out and Keeping Silent, Some Sins of the Tongue, and Condemnation.

Part 2 of the same book deals with the 'Spiritual Means' and contains 8 chapters on: Prayer, Fasting, Almsgiving, Spiritual Readings, the Holy Bible, Spiritual Exercises, Retreat, and Service.

Part 3 deals with 'Advanced Spirituality' and contains 10 chapters which are: Love of God to Man, Love of Man to God, Love of Man to his Brother, Faith in God, Faith in the Miracles of the Lord Jesus, Hope, Life of Peace, Life of Submission, the Narrow Door, and the Kingdom.

St. Mark Coptic Orthodox Church, in Chicago, U.S.A., translated into English and published the 3 parts of this book "Paradise of the Spirit".

The present book is the second edition of the English translation of Part 2 of "Paradise of the Spirit".

May this book become a blessing to our lives and help us to grow in the love of God.

May 2001

**Introduction of Part Two of
Paradise of the Spirit
by
Monk Archpriest
Shenouda El-Soriany (Late Bishop Youanis)**

THIS BOOK

The first part of this book "Paradise of the Spirit", saw the light around the middle of 1960. In it we mentioned that there will be two more complementary parts. Since then, people were eagerly and persistently asking when will part two of that book appear. I thank God for the grace which He gave to part one in the eyes of many, and I thank all those beloved who expressed their loving feelings in appreciation of this book. Yet, I wish to tell them that publishing a book is not an easy matter.

It was possible to publish part two of this book a little while after publishing part one. In this case, it would have appeared in a different form and with different contents to what I intended. We declined to present part two to the Church, except in an almost complete form.

Writing this second part took a tremendous, and in most cases, a continuous effort. A mother gives birth to her child in a few hours, but it took me almost 6 full years to give birth to parts one and two of this book. During those years, I read whatever books I could get hold of about the Church's saintly fathers. Some of those books were manuscripts and others were translations from live languages, as well as many other books.

This part contains eight subjects. They are the fruit of reading more than 200 books. Some of these books cannot be grasped by the ordinary reader, because they are either not available or difficult to read. I mention that, as some people may consider the two and a half years which lapsed since publishing part one, a long time to account for and requires an apology. They rather realise that to author and write a book is a tedious and difficult task. Let people read this book eagerly, knowing that reading a book like this one, spares them the effort of searching and reading tens of other books.

We refer to the effort spent in producing this part, not for glory, rather we believe that this modest "Spiritual Paradise" is a plant from God, and is the fruit of many prayers which many

people raised, asking God to be kind and give grace. We have no excellence in anything then, if we speak, we speak as the oracles of God (1 Peter 4:11), and if we work, it is from the grace which God gives.

It is a pleasure to realise that the two parts of this book "Paradise of the Spirit" - which are the beginning of our production - appeared during the reign of His Holiness Pope Kyrillos VI. May God guard his safety, give him a long life and affirm his seat with goodness and justice for the benefit of the Church. To him we present this modest work to bless, asking God - with his prayers - to make it a means of blessing for many.

I find it my duty to offer my sincere thanks to the fathers in the blessed Monastery of St. Mary (El-Soryan), who supported me with their prayers. In their forefront is the most Reverend His Grace Anba Thawfilos, Bishop and head of this Monastery, the star of the holy Sheheit desert and the enlightened Bishop who does not spare an effort in serving the Church, prospering monasticism, and helping his sons the monks. He does that in a spirit of love, meekness, sacrifice and self-denial. May the Lord guard his life, recompense him for his toil, and multiply his pious disciples, by the supplication of the Virgin Mary and the Saints.

In part 1 of this book, I gave thanks to one of the fathers in the Monastery, who shared in the substance of this book, by his writings, guidance, and advice. Yet he declined - in an ascetic self-denial - that we do not mention his name. In this part again I give thanks to this Father, but after the Lord fulfilled His promise in him, and the Church refused to leave a shining light under a basket. The Church raised and put him on a lampstand to give light to all who are in the house (Matthew 5:15). This shining light moved from the depth of the desert to the heart of the Theological College, and Sunday Schools, in Cairo, Egypt. Against his desire, he moved from a hermit's cave to the teaching and ministering position. It gives me pleasure to give my thanks to His Grace Bishop Shenouda [in November 1971, Bishop Shenouda became Pope Shenouda III]. May the Lord God guard his life and multiply the fruits of his hands.

I also offer my thanks to the brethren who are ministering in the field of Sunday Schools in the city of Giza for their help in publishing the two parts of this book. Thanks are also due to many dear brothers who helped in one way or the other in the production of this book. May the Lord compensate all of them in the heavenly Jerusalem.

As I put this modest book in the hands of God Who loved and guided us, I ask Him to make it a blessing to all who read in it the words of the Spirit and the Life, particularly, the brothers and dear students of the Theological College, and the Sunday School teachers, all over the See of St. Mark. I ask Him to support me with His grace to produce part 3 of this book.

May God be glorified in our weakness, and to Him be all glory for ever. Amen.

**Monk Archpriest
Shenouda El-Soriany**

19 March 1963, 10 Baramhat 1679
Remembrance day of the discovery of the Holy Cross.

Preface

Dear reader: In this book, we offer you the second edition of the English translation of part 2 of the book "Paradise of the Spirit", by His Grace Bishop Youanis, late Bishop of Gharbia, Egypt, who slept in the Lord in November 1987.

Picture of Father Samuel Thabet Samue

May this book be a blessing in your life and help you to grow in the love of God, by the prayers of the father of fathers **His Holiness Pope Shenouda III.**

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you

Father Samuel Thabet Samuel

May 2001

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**All Bible Quotations are from the New King James Version
Except for
the Apocrypha which are from the New English Version**

HOW?

“Now Jesus sat opposite the treasury and saw how the people put money into the treasury. And many who were rich put in much. Then one poor widow came and threw in two mites, which make a quadrans. So He called His disciples to Himself and said to them, "Assuredly, I say to you that this poor widow has put in more than all those who have given to the treasury; for they all put in out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all that she had, her whole livelihood”

(Mark 12:41-44)

Jesus sat in the temple opposite the treasury where people present their donations and offerings, and watched the proceedings. The unexpected conclusion was contrary to what was anticipated by everybody. A poor widow who did not throw more than two mites, was commended

by the Lord as having put in more than all others who had given to the treasury.

We notice here that the Lord Jesus did not sit opposite the treasury to see how much money people put, but how do they put in their money. People can see and realise the "How much", but God alone knows the "How", and nobody else except Him understands its essence. We mention this point in relation to what we are about to study from the "means of grace" which is the subject of this book.

The Lord Jesus Who sat in the temple opposite the treasury at that time, **is Himself present in your temple, which is created by Him, and sees the treasury of your heart.** He does not care for "How much" as He cares for "How", and He is going to judge the people on the Last Great Day according to "How" and not according to "How much". **He is going to ask me:**

"How did I pray?", and not how many prayers I said, how many psalms I learned, and how many prayers I recited? I might have prayed for a long time, but without spirit, and the Lord repeats His words to me "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing" (John 6:63).

How did I pray, and not how many hours I used to pray during the day. I might have stood a long time praying, but my mind was wandering around the world during the prayer. I should "pray with the spirit, also pray with the understanding" (1 Corinthians 14:15).

How did I fast, and not how many days or even how many years I fasted! Did I fast from the food of the body only, or from "every evil and with purity and goodness"? Did I fast the fasting of the body or the fasting of the spirit? How did I eat? Did I eat lavishly or did I eat for the sake of supporting the body and its strength?!

How did I give alms, and not how much money did I give. Did I give to be glorified by people or for the love of God and his poor people who are my brothers? "If a man would give for (instead of) love all the wealth of his house, it would be utterly despised" (Songs 8:7). The two mites of the poor widow had a great value in the hands of the Lord, because of the holy desire which moved her to "put in all that she had, her whole livelihood" (Mark 12:41).

God will ask me "How did you read the Holy Bible?" Not how many chapters or how many books did I read. Did I really feel that this reading was food for my spirit or was it just reading?

God will ask you also how was your heart, was it inflamed for the sake of glorifying His name and the coming of His kingdom, and not how long did you spend in serving him. Did you serve "with eye service, as men-pleasers, or as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God

from the heart" (Ephesians 6:6).

HOW ..., HOW ... AND HOW?!

"How" is the spirit with which things are made and are achieved. It is love without which all we do are vain. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit" (John 4:24) and this spirit is "How".

The widow whose giving was praised by the Lord exceeded all those who gave their offering before her, and surpassed those who paid more than her. "But many who are first will be last, and the last first" (Matthew 19:30).

Who would imagine or believe that this poor widow put in more than all those who had given to the treasury; and who would believe that the value of the two mites became more than the large amounts of money. Who could believe that, except for the witness of the Lord Himself Who searches the hearts and knows the desires and the intentions?!

Without the "How", the rich can inherit the kingdom with their offerings and money; but they cannot. The Lord Jesus is sitting opposite my heart and sees how do I give alms, how do I pray, how do I fast, how do I struggle against my thoughts, how do I defeat desires, and in general how do I live.

This "How" always pushes me to look towards God. He is the only One Who knows it. Why then do I care for men, and why do I go after pleasing them, as long as they judge according to appearance?!

Talking about "**How**" leads us to talk about another error which we often commit, namely, "**Worshipping men**", which means that a person aims to please the people in all that he does.

WORSHIPPING MEN

What do you aspire to in your worship and in your pious activities? Do you aim to please men or to please God? Listen my brother to the answer of Apostle Paul "**For I still pleased men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ**" (Galatians 1:10). The whole worship should be offered to God alone and to nobody else. But if you aim in your worship and in your entire life to please men,

then this is worshipping men. In this case, you are worshipping men, even when you do not realise or admit it.

REVIEW TO SOME OF YOUR ACTIVITIES:

Your Prayers:

What is your feeling when you stand to pray with others? What do you do when you are asked to pray in a certain meeting? Some when they stand for prayer with others and are asked to pray, tend to tidy their prayers, and augment them with verses and quoted terms. Each word of such prayers takes into consideration those who pray with him. This prayer is offered to the people not to God. **Free yourself from worshipping people, and assume that you are alone during prayer even if you are praying with a multitude of people.**

In church also, when you stand to pray, feel that you are alone. Do not worship (bow down) because the people, or most of them do so, or because there are some people present in the church who know you and have a good opinion about your spiritual life in the church.

Many people are not aware of when to stand, when to sit or when to bow down as they imitate each other in the church. There is a group of those people who perform the outward form of worship, in prayers and bowing down, so that they may be seen by others. Such people have a "form of godliness". This is not worship of God, but of men. Do not sit because others sit, and do not stand because others stand.

Feel the reverence of the place and say with Jacob Israel "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it. How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven!" (Genesis 28:16, 17). **Feel that you are standing in front of Christ and care about nobody else. Christ is in front of you on the altar.**

Your Almsgiving:

Why do you give your offerings in the church during the Eucharist? Do you put money in the plate because the carrier of the plate knows you, so as not to feel embarrassed? Do you put a large amount of money for his sake, or because the person who sits next to you knows you? If you give for their sake, to be admired by them or not to feel embarrassed, then this is worshipping men. Arrange your life in your own way, do not be embarrassed by anybody, and do not behave in any

way to please any man whoever he is. This is fleeing from worshipping men.

Remember the poor widow who gave two mites and remember the praises of the Lord for her deed, because he looked to "how" she used to give. Imitate her and recall the words of the Apostle "So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7).

There are many people who give to the churches and care for nothing except for having their names mentioned to others and being admired by men. Those are miserable people, and let them hear the words of the Lord about them "Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward" (Matthew 6:2).

Your Service:

When you receive some comfort in your ministry, praise God. Do not try to glorify yourself. It happens many times that a minister wants to know the feeling of the people towards his service and what do they say about it and about him. He might utter a negative remark to some of his hearers, such as "I was so tired that day and I felt that the words I said were lukewarm". His hearer may answer him in a courteous way and start to praise him and his service. Then he says "I am weak, ..., this is the work of God". In fact these words pleased him and what happened **was men's worship so let us not lie to ourselves or deceive ourselves.**

FEATURES OF WORSHIPPING MEN IN THE SERVICE:

Consider a minister who preaches in a meeting of farmers, workers or of Sunday School teachers, or who teaches a class of small children. If it happens that an important personality comes to hear the preaching or the teaching of this minister, he may start to raise the level of his talk above the level of those whom he preaches or teaches. In this case he is not considering those he ministers to, as he wants to please this important person who came to listen to him. Is this not a kind of worshipping men? If not, what is it then?!

A deacon who serves in the church during the Eucharist, inside or outside the altar and "glories" with his voice, presents his service to the people to admire and praise him. Poor is this person who leaves Christ Who is present on the altar, misses pleasing Him in order to please the people. The responses of the deacons should be spiritual, with piety and steadfastness.

BLESSINGS OF FLEEING FROM WORSHIPPING MEN:

* **Zacchaeus got rid of worshipping men.** He did not think about what would the people say about him when he climbed up a sycamore tree, like the youngsters. It was a holy desire which got hold of his heart, as he wanted to find out who Jesus was. For this reason, Jesus left the multitude crowding on the two sides of the road and looked up to this man who loved Him and opened his heart to accept Him. Jesus told him "Zacchaeus, make haste and come down, for today I must stay at your house" (Luke 19:5). The word "must" means "Zacchaeus, you forced me with your behaviour to stay at your house", and Zacchaeus gained salvation, he and all his household.

* **The sinful woman** in the city, who when she knew that Jesus sat at the table in the house of Simon the Pharisee, brought an alabaster flask of fragrant oil, and stood at His feet behind Him weeping; and she began to wash His feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head; and she kissed His feet and anointed them with the fragrant oil (Luke 7:37, 38). The people who were present were murmuring about her and about the Lord Himself and were saying "This man (Jesus), if He were a prophet, would know who and what manner of woman this is who is touching Him, for she is a sinner" (Luke 7:39).

This woman did not care for peoples' praise and did not care about their whispers and their mumbling, and did not delay her repentance until Jesus left this particular house, but forgot all that. She had in front of her a sacred aim which is her repentance and her salvation. For this reason she deserved to hear from the Lord the verdict of her guiltlessness "Your sins are forgiven" (Luke 7:48).

* **Why do you care about people that you worship them and enslave yourself to them?** Free yourself from them and feel that you are always standing in front of God. We are His children and from Him we ask for His pleasure and for His best reward.

* **What do I profit if all the world testified to my devout behaviour and my piety.** Will this benefit me?

Let me be with the Lord and let me always repeat the sweet song "My beloved is mine, and I am His" (Songs 2:16).

CHAPTER 1

PRAYER

Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you"

(Matthew 7:7)

- A) Prayer: its superiority and power**
- B) Our need of prayer**
- C) Conditions of acceptable prayer**
- D) Secret of answered prayer**

- E) Encouragement for prayer**
- F) Delay in answering prayer**
- G) How do we pray?**
- H) Some problems with prayer**
- I) The unceasing prayer**
- J) Praying according to rule**

A) PRAYER: ITS SUPERIORITY AND POWER

WHAT IS PRAYER?

Do not think dear brother, that this is a simple easy question, and do not imagine that you can answer it with ease and simplicity. The disciples of the Lord themselves used to lack this knowledge, and had to ask Him one day "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1). The saints also differ in their answers about the definition of prayer. Each saint and each man of prayer described it in a particular way, not as he heard or as he read about it, but as he himself experienced it in his holy life with God. One says **it is the key to heaven, healing for the sick, guardian for the healthy. Another says it is a sharp weapon, a mighty helper, and an influential intercessor. A third describes it as a safe haven, valuable treasure and the work of spiritual people.**

St. John Chrysostom said "Prayer is a great weapon, an endless treasure, richness which never falls, quiet haven, ... It is the source and basis of countless blessings. It is strong, even stronger than strength itself".

St. Basil the Great defines prayer as "Being attached to God in all moments and situations of life. Then life becomes one prayer, without interruption or disturbance".

St. Augustine defines prayer by saying "It is the key of heaven, by its power you can do everything. It is the shield of our lives, source of all virtues, the ladder upon which you rise to God, the work of the angels, and the basis of faith".

St. Isaac, who was great among the learned people, defines prayer according to his experience as "Prayer is the continuous remembering of God in the heart of His fearers. It is the sailing of our minds to God. It empties the conscience from all present matters, is a heart whose sight is completely fixed on the longing for the coming hope. Prayer is the pulse of the live will by God, dead to the life of the flesh. Real prayer and death to the world are the same. That is, denying one of himself is being regular in prayer. **Prayer is the cry of the mind, which calls without will from the anguish in the heart**".

Prayer is a means for man to come close to God. It is the essence of religion, even its heart, as there is no religion without prayer. It is the oldest known statute and most widely spread. Many believe that it is older than the times of sacrifices, because it is the basis of the sacrifices in all religions. From early centuries, people started to "call the name of God".

Prayer is an inborn instinct, and it is among the most discreet actions and psychological states, which is difficult for a person to describe well. It challenges every description and every expression, and it is more profound than any language man speaks.

Prayer is the continuous beating of the heart, the words on our lips, the thoughts of our minds, the deeds of our lives. It is the arrival of our spirit to the Source of Grace, like a container from which we receive the substance of life and peace.

We do not overstate in what we have said about prayer. It is enough that the Lord Jesus gave it all power and might to function "And whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive" (Matthew 21:22). For this Apostle Paul attracts the attention of the believers to it, its importance and its priority and says "Therefore **I exhort first of all** that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, ... **For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior**" (1 Timothy 2:1-3). "**Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication,** with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God" (Philippians 4:6).

SUPERIORITY OF PRAYER:

We have seen how "prayer avails much" (James 5:16). No wonder then that **the work of prayer is superior and distinguished over any other work. Because of the superiority of prayer, the Lord appointed the angels to present it to Him.** "Then another angel, having a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. And he was given much incense, **that he should offer it with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne**" (Revelation 8:3, 4).

The prayer which is practised well pleases God much, and delights the angels and the heavenly hosts. **John in his revelation expressed** that when he was talking about the twenty-four priests, by saying "Each having a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints" (Revelation 5:8). **St. John Chrysostom says** "Prayer was described as incense because of its good smell and because it purifies the soul from the rot of sin". **The angel said to Tobit** "When you and Sarah prayed, **it was I who brought your prayers into the glorious presence of the Lord**" (Tobit 12:12).

St. Isaac said "Personal bargaining with God is the work of the heavenly orders, and was presented to the people by the Son of God who descended to our world and showed us the work of the unseen hosts. This is the economy which is bound to be for all people in the general resurrection. Prayer is a deed elevated above all virtues, and a virtue more honorable than all deeds. It is the work of the saints the children of light, the work of Mikhail and Gabriel".

St. John Chrysostom said "When you pray, do you not speak with God? Is there a privilege like this?"

ITS SUPERIORITY:

SOME SAYINGS OF THE FATHERS

St. John Chrysostom said 'Think' in the high level of joy you reach by prayer and of the honor of the glory related to it. **With it you converse with the Almighty and recollect with Christ.** With it you request all what you desire. No tongue can describe the great honor of visiting with God, and the great benefit of that. In the world, those who live with the wise and the learned become wise and clever by pursuing them, and a person becomes virtuous by dealing with virtuous people. How much benefit we receive by being regular in visiting God!! **The Psalmist said "They looked to Him and were radiant"'** (Psalm 34:5).

He also said "**There is nothing stronger than prayer. There is nothing which is equivalent to it.** A man goes to speak with the king in a private matter in the presence of all the

members of the army, officers and leaders of different high ranks. They all look at him with respect and regard. This is what happens to those who pray. Imagine a person who comes in with courage and determination in the presence of angels, the Seraphim, the Cherubim, and all the unseen hosts, and approaches the King of all these forces and speaks with Him. What an honor!!".

He also said "Prayer resembles a source of water in the centre of a garden. Anything without it is dry and fruitless, and everything with it is moist, fruitful and bright. Prayer keeps all the holy sprouts in a state of continuous growth, ... I mean the virtues".

If prayer has this great honor and endless power, how much should we thank God for that! **If God for example made a particular appointment - once a month - to answer everyone who has a request, is this not considered a immense grace, which we should thank God for?!** If a worldly king did something like that with his people, do they not count that as a great gesture? If this is so, how much should we consider the grace presented to us by God - not once a month only, but every day and every moment!! **The Prophet David said: "Evening and morning and at noon I will pray, and cry aloud, and He shall hear my voice. He has redeemed my soul in peace"** (Psalm 55:17, 18).

There is another prospect to the superiority of the work of prayer, which we realise from what St. John Cassian said: "Prayer is the support of the three duties laid upon the Christian person. The first is his relation to God, the second to himself and the third to the relative. Our duty towards God is shown by prayer, as we call upon His name and show our love, faithfulness to Him, and our faith in Him as we confess Him as the source of all blessings. As for our duty towards ourselves, by prayer we search ourselves and measure our spiritual lives and endeavour to be worthy of the sonship of God. Our duty towards the relative is perceived by asking and demanding for him what we ask for ourselves".

B) OUR NEED TO PRAY

How much does a person need to pray for both his spiritual and physical needs. The relation between prayer and the life of the spirit is very strong and is inseparable. The life of the spirit requires - as a vital matter - the life of continuous prayer. I am under the leadership of the Spirit, constantly, if I live the life of continuous prayer.

Without prayer the spiritual life is not straightened. In prayer there is healing of all our ills. It is a faithful means for securing ourselves in virtue. It is everything in the life of a true believer because it is the fellowship with his Creator. If we are branches in the True Vine, we make sure always to receive the necessary sap from the source, otherwise we wither and fall.

This is what we receive by prayer "**The grace of abiding in God**". **Prayer is a strong tie which binds us to God, pulls us to heaven, and spares us the evil of falling and deviating. It saves us from all difficulties and troubles. Even if we encounter some lukewarmness in prayer, there is no cure for this state except by prayer itself!!** Prayer for the spiritual life is like the hand for the body. The hand is a general member for the whole body, and also it is a special tool for itself by which it serves itself. If the hand is sick, the hand treats itself, if it is dirty, the hand washes itself and if it feels cold, the hand makes itself warm. In total, the hand does everything, and prayer is the same.

There is a strong resemblance between breathing and the necessity of prayer. Breathing is necessary for the physical life. Likewise, prayer is necessary for the growth of the spiritual life. Physical death is certain if we stop breathing and if we stop praying, spiritual death will follow. Breathing is the expansion and contraction of the lungs for air necessary for life to enter our bodies, and prayer brings us the love of God necessary for our spiritual being.

There are differences - no doubt - between breathing and prayer. Breathing is a natural mechanical process done without awareness, and we can hardly stop it even if we try. But prayer - on the other hand - requires a will and an effort. It is easier to breathe than not to breathe, yet it is easier not to pray than to pray. We have to know how to pray, stage by stage, and press ourselves for that.

The wings of a bird want to fly, the fins of a fish like water. Likewise, the instinct of the heart aims towards God. This is well expressed by a contemporary person who said "My heart is greatly in need of You God, my heart is greatly in need of You! There is no member in my being which needs You like my heart. Everything in me except my heart - may be satisfied with Your gifts: daily bread satisfies my hunger, earthly water quenches my thirst, the heat of the fire drives away my feeling of cold, outer rest gets rid of my fatigue. Yet no external means is able to purify my heart. This world does not take my heart into account. It takes my eyes and my ears into account, but it does not account for my heart".

We may realise our need of prayer from the following points:

1 - IT IS THE SECRET OF OUR VICTORY:

There is no doubt that prayer is the secret of victory. Nobody dares to say he is not in need of prayer. He who dares to say that, hints inclusively that he is not in need of God Himself and of His help! **St. John Chrysostom said "If you notice somebody who does not like to pray, know in this case that there is nothing good at all in him. He who does not pray to God is dead and there is no life in him".**

In His eternal plan, what God intended to offer to the souls, He planned to offer through their prayers "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you" (Matthew 7:7). **This is like the ladder which Jacob saw in his dream which was set up**

on the earth, and its top reached to heaven; and there the angels of God were ascending and descending it (Genesis 28:12). That is in order to present our requests to God, and to bring back His blessings to us.

How weak is Man and how many are his physical and spiritual needs. So many are his spiritual enemies!! Because of that, it is very fitting for you to always repeat the words of Jehoshaphat king of Judah, which he said when the people of Moab with the people of Ammon came to battle against him "O our God, will You not judge them? For we have no power against this great multitude that is coming against us; nor do we know what to do, **but our eyes are upon You**" (2 Chronicles 20:12).

The Lord Jesus revealed to us the secret of victory over our spiritual enemies when He said "This kind (the devil) can come out by nothing but prayer and fasting" (Mark 9:29). The saintly fathers experienced prayer in this sense, which made one of them say "**There is nothing fearful for the devil more than seeing a man praying**".

It was mentioned once about St. Tadros the Egyptian that while he was in his room in the Eskeit desert, a devil came and tried to enter the room, but he could not because the saint tied him down outside the room by prayer. Another devil came and tried to enter the room, but again the saint tied him down by prayer. A third devil came and found the two first ones tied down outside the room, and asked them for the reason. They replied that there is someone inside the room praying, preventing them from entering. This third devil became angry and tried to push his way into the room, but was also tied down by the saint's prayer. The devils were frustrated and begged the saint to let them loose. The saint untied them and told them to go away with shame, and they went away with great shame.

After St. Paul mentioned a number of different spiritual weapons (Ephesians 6:13-17), he added this last phrase "Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints" (Ephesians 6:18). That is, the helmet of salvation, the shield of faith and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, are not enough without prayer.

There are many sayings by the saintly fathers in this regard. St. Augustine says "None of the elected can gain his own salvation without God's help, and nobody deserves this help except by prayer". St. John El-Dargy who is known for his virtues says "The secret of continuous grace and virtue is continuous prayer. He who leans on the stick of prayer, his feet do not slip. Even if his feet slip he does not completely fall, because prayer is a help to him who walks in the road of piety".

One father said "Prayer is the means of our spiritual growth. God planned to increase our human nature by marriage, and the land becomes fertile by planting it. Likewise, the economy of His Divine Care plans that the souls receive many graces by prayer. For this reason, the Lord Jesus said in the Holy Bible "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you" (Matthew 7:7)".

St. Augustine calls it "the key of heaven". Truly, it is a great key which opens all the doors of heaven and all the safes of all heavenly treasures. By prayer, the door of repentance opens for us and we are forgiven. In this St. Isaac says "He who is careless in prayer, and thinks that he has another door for repentance, is deceived by the devil".

By prayer, the fear of God stays in our hearts - and "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Psalm 111:10) - and how true what one of the fathers said "Prayer, the mother of virtues cry out "Come, you children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord" (Psalm 34:11)".

Finally, prayer saves us in the Great Day of Judgement. The Lord Jesus said "But take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that Day come on you unexpectedly. For it will come as a snare on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth. **Watch therefore, and pray** always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man" (Luke 21:34-36).

2 - A MEANS FOR RECEIVING BLESSINGS:

In the forefront of the blessings of prayer are the Gifts of the Holy Spirit, whether in consecrating the sacraments in the church or in our own lives. The Lord Jesus said "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Heavenly Father **give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!**" (Luke 11:13). When the disciples prayed after they were threatened by the high priests because they healed the lame man "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).

Truly, there is a strong relation between the Holy Spirit and prayer. The Holy Spirit is the "Spirit of Prayer". It was called that in (Zechariah 12:10) "And I will pour on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem **the Spirit of grace and supplication;** then they will look on Me ...". Also in the Epistles of St. Paul, twice it was mentioned in relation to prayer "you received

the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, "Abba, Father"" (Romans 8:15), and "God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, "Abba, Father!"" (Galatians 4:6). The Lord Jesus used the same words "Abba, Father!" in His farewell prayer in Gethsemane (Mark 14:36).

In the two previous verses of St. Paul we read the word "cry out" in one verse and the word "crying out" in the other verse. That is, it is the Holy Spirit Himself who cries out, which without doubt, shows the amount of help which God gives to man in prayer!!

The matter may become lucid when we meditate on the words of Apostle Paul which he wrote in his Epistle to the Romans "Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. **For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groaning which cannot be uttered.** Now He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God" (Romans 8:26, 27). It is clear from the words of the Apostle that if we are left to ourselves, we do not know how to pray, but the Spirit of God interferes and joins us in our weaknesses "and makes intercession for us with groaning which cannot be uttered".

Prayer makes us ready to receive many spiritual blessings. We here mention some of them from the sayings of St. Isaac El-Soriany:

* **"A person who prays, not only he belittles spiritual wars, but also he scorns the body which is the source of warfare".**

* **"By prayer, the work of repentance is completed,** which is the feeling of sadness and the sorrow of the soul. By it also the soul moves in a way far above the motion of the body and the self, which the fathers call the spiritual economy".

* By continuing steadfastly in prayer, the feeling of shyness and decency in front of God grows and increases in the person who prays. **Moreover, from continuously looking to and meeting God in prayer, pains do not affect him easily.**

* **"If continuous meditation unites with pure prayer, the words of the Lord "For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:20) are fulfilled. And the three mean the soul, body and spirit, or the mind, continuous meditation and pure prayer".**

* **"The heat of prayer and continuous meditation burn the pains and the thoughts like fire does".**

* Give yourself to the work of prayer, and you will hear what you cannot hear from anybody, as nobody by himself is qualified to hear it!!

* Familiarity with Almighty God is formed from continuous bargaining with and continuous talking to God in prayer".

* **St. Isaac explains that by prayer we obtain purity by which we see God.** He says "Not by much knowledge and different books we obtain or find purity, but by caring for prayer".

* **Finally this saint explains to us that by prayer we arrive to the Divine Love which is the highest virtues and levels** "The level of Divine Love is superior to prayer, yet without supplication, prayer and continuous sorrowful tears with watching and asceticism, we do not obtain this Love".

We have seen that prayer qualifies us for the mercy, help and grace of God. Our teacher St. Paul said "Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, **that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need**" (Hebrews 4:16). How much man is in need of the mercy and grace of God. All the treasures of mercy and grace are stored for him who asks "**Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full**" (John 6:24). Perhaps this last verse explains to us also **that prayer is the road to complete joy - not only because by it we get all we ask for, but what is more profound and beautiful is that prayer makes God a touched reality. When we ask God for a specific thing and He offers it to us, God becomes for us not an imaginary idea, but a strong live reality.**

There is no joy in heaven or on earth which equals the joy of the fellowship with God. This joy of prayer is the joy which the Psalmist spoke about as a blessing "in Your presence is fullness of joy" (Psalm 16:11).

There is not enough space for us to mention in detail all the blessings which we receive by prayer. The truth is that God made prayer a means by which we gain all His graces and blessings. Apostle James explains that adequately by saying "**Yet you do not have because you do not ask**" (James 4:2). Hence if we review the weak points in our spiritual lives, the apparent failure and the lukewarmness in the Church ministry in general, and tried to understand their causes, we find that the answer to all that is in the last words of the Apostle "**Yet you do not have because you do not ask**".

3 - THE LORD JESUS AS AN EXAMPLE:

There is no stronger proof for the necessity of prayer for man, and his real need of it, than the fact that it was an integral part of the life of the Lord Jesus when He was in the flesh. The Scholar Tertelian said "What is more than the fact that the Lord Himself prayed, to let realise the importance of prayer!!". He was not in need of prayer because all authority has been given to Him in heaven and on earth (Matthew 28:18), but He left us an example, that we should follow in His steps (1 Peter 2:21).

When Jesus was baptized "He prayed" and the heavens were opened and the Spirit of God descended like a dove and alighted upon Him (Matthew 3:16). **After Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law from the fever,** He prayed "in the morning, having risen a long while before daylight, He went out and departed to a solitary place; **and there He prayed"** (Mark 1:35). **Before He chose His twelve disciples** "He went out to the mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God" (Luke 6:12).

In the event of Transfiguration "He took Peter, John, and James and went up on the mountain to pray. And as He prayed, the appearance of His face was altered, and His robe became white and glistening" (Luke 9:28, 29)!! We also read the Great Farewell Prayer of the Lord Jesus which is cited in (John Chapter 17), in which He prayed for Himself, for His Disciples and for all who believe in Him by their words.

4 - THE APOSTLES THEMSELVES AS EXAMPLES:

The Apostles - Disciples of the Lord - Leaders of the First Church, made prayer number one in their lives. When they wanted to choose a disciple to replace Judas the betrayer, they prayed and the lot fell on Matthias (Acts 1:24-26). **After the descent of the Holy Spirit upon them on the day of Pentecost,** the writer of the book of Acts describes them as continuing steadfastly in prayer (Acts 2:42). **After the event of healing the person who was lame from birth,** and the threats of the high priest family to them, they assembled together and "they raised their voice to God with one accord ... " (Acts 4:24), "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).

When their responsibilities increased, and they thought of appointing seven deacons to help them, their logic was: "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; **but we will give ourselves**

continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:2-4).

And when Herod apprehended St. Peter and put him in prison, intending to kill him, the writer of the book of Acts says "Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the Church" (Acts 12:5). Then when Peter was delivered by an angel and came to the house of Mary, the mother of Mark, "there were many gathered together **praying**" (Acts 12:12).

We can easily now understand the secret behind the power of the first Church. The reason is that she was "a Church of prayer".

If we take St. Paul as a model for the Disciples, we find his Epistles full of the riches of reverence, depth of worship, supplications, and fullness of thanksgivings. The Epistles of this Apostle signify the richness of his spiritual life, in a pious worshipping language, which elevates the soul to the presence of God. Without intension, St. Paul drew a picture in his Epistles, of himself in its different stages, from crossing the pitch darkness of night, to the arrival to daylight, and from leaving the prison of sin to the enjoyment of the glories of the children of God. **He has expressed all that with inmost sighs and strong supplications, which overflow in his Epistles.**

St. Paul sailed in the high sky of prayer; he received guided revelations from God about His will towards him (Galatians 1:12, 2:2). He received from God answers to his prayers "For there stood by me this night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve, saying, "Do not be afraid, Paul; you must be brought before Caesar"; and indeed God has granted you all those who sail with you" (Acts 27:23, 24). No wonder that he continued "Therefore take heart, men, for I believe God that it will be just as it was told me" (Acts 27:25).

He who studies the life of this Apostle realises that he was in continuous fellowship with God, feeling his constant presence with the Almighty. When he commanded the believers in Thessalonica saying "Pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks" (1 Thessalonians 5:17), he was transmitting his own life. **We have no doubt that the spiritual life of Paul is explained by this short verse which was written in the dawn of his new life, and which was revealed to Ananias in Damascus; "he is praying"** (Acts 9:11).

Even in the darkest times in his life, Paul was praying. When he was imprisoned in Philippi with Silas, he was put into the inner prison and his feet were fastened in the stocks, and everybody was asleep, but at midnight Paul was praying and singing hymns to God. Suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were loosed (Acts 16:24-26)!!

Paul asked for himself, prayed for others and gave supplications for the Churches he founded, appeals for the tribes of Israel and intercessions for the whole of the human race.

We are able to appreciate the inflamed spirit of prayer which was working in the soul of this missionary saint, "For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of His Son, that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers, making request ..." (Romans 1:9, 10). "Therefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, do not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers" (Ephesians 1:15, 16)... "For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding" (Colossians 1:9)... "Night and day praying exceedingly that we may see your face and perfect what is lacking in your faith?" (1 Thessalonians 3:10)... "I thank God, whom I serve with a pure conscience, as my forefathers did, as without ceasing I remember you in my prayers night and day" (2 Timothy 1:3).

POWER OF PRAYER

Without doubt, prayer has power. The most spiritual people, the strongest in their faith, the early fathers, the prophets and the Disciples, ..., all of them found power in prayer.

Communicating with God and the unseen world, is not only a proven reality for those who pray, but also is accompanied always with active power which they feel "But those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint" (Isaiah 40:31).

When an electric circuit between two opposite poles is closed, electricity flows, lamps are lit and machines work. Likewise, when man communicates with God in true prayer, he is enlightened and receives mighty power with which he is able to do everything, the works that Jesus did; and greater works than these he will do (John 14:12).

When man gets hold of God by prayer, God gets hold of man ... "Deep calls unto deep at the noise of Your waterfalls; all Your waves and billows have gone over me" (Psalm 42:7). The depth of our poverty calls forth the depth of the mercies of God. We know the power of prayer from its nature, from our experiences and from the assurance of the Word of God, whether in the form of a command, a promise or as an example.

In the past God spoke to Prophet Moses concerning the poor and said "And it will be that when he cries to Me, I will hear, for I am gracious" (Exodus 22:27). God gave Solomon this great

promise after he built the temple **"I have heard your prayer, and have chosen this place for Myself as a house of sacrifice ... if My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land. Now My eyes will be open and My ears attentive to prayer made in this place"** (2 Chronicles 7:12-15).

The Book of Psalms is full of Divine Promises which confirm to us that prayers are answered and they have power: "He does not forget the cry of the humble" (Psalm 9:12), "For the Lord is righteous, he loves righteousness; his countenance beholds the upright" (Psalm 11:7), "The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and His ears are open to their cry (Psalm 34:15), "Delight yourself also in the Lord, and He shall give you the desires of your heart" (Psalm 37:4), "When I cry out to You, then my enemies will turn back; this I know, because God is for me" (Psalm 56:9), "He only is my rock and my salvation; he is my defense; I shall not be greatly moved" (Psalm 62:2).

"My soul, wait silently for God alone, for my expectation is from Him. He only is my rock and my salvation; he is my defense; I shall not be moved. In God is my salvation and my glory; the rock of my strength, and my refuge, is in God" (Psalm 62:5-7), "Also to You, O Lord, belongs mercy; for You render to each one according to his work" (Psalm 62:12), "For the Lord hears the poor, and does not despise His prisoners" (Psalm 69:33), "Sing aloud to God our strength; make a joyful shout to the God of Jacob" (Psalm 81:1), "For You, Lord, are good, and ready to forgive, and abundant in mercy to all those who call upon You" (Psalm 86:5).

"He shall call upon Me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble; I will deliver him and honor him" (Psalm 91:15), "The Lord is near to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him in truth" (Psalm 145:18) ... "He shall regard the prayer of the destitute, and shall not despise their prayer. This will be written for the generation to come, that a people yet to be created may praise the Lord. For He looked down from the height of His sanctuary; from heaven the Lord viewed the earth, to hear the groaning of the prisoner, to release those appointed to death" (Psalm 102:17-20).

He who reads the Books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Joel, Amos, Zephaniah, and Zechariah, finds that all of them are full of great and valuable promises for those who pray.

Add to the above that the door which was partially opened in the Old Testament, is now wide open in the New Testament, and offers us exceeding enjoyment of the promises of our Great God, which He puts in the hands of everybody who prays:

"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be

opened" (Matthew 7:7, 8). The Lord of Glory continues with a definite assurance by saying "Or what man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!" (Matthew 7:9-11)...

"Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven" (Matthew 18:19)... "And whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive" (Matthew 21:22)... "Most assuredly, I say to you, whatever you ask the Father in My name He will give you" (John 16:23).

For this reason, believers in all times come boldly to the Throne of Grace and they obtain mercy, and find grace in help in time of need (Hebrews 4:16)... , they pray for themselves, for one another and for the Church, because they know that "the effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much" (James 5:16)... How many miracles happened and still happen by prayer. We have from the many answered prayers in the Holy Bible more convincing proofs than the promises which we have referred to. Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Gideon, David, Elijah, Elisha, Asa, Jehoshaphat, Ezekiel, Isaiah, Manasseh, Daniel, Jeremiah, ..., all of them witnessed by their lives and by their answered prayers to the power of prayer.

C) CONDITIONS OF ACCEPTABLE PRAYER

There are some essential points concerning prayer and the person who prays for prayer to be acceptable; prayer should be:

1 - FROM A PURE HEART:

The pure heart is a temple for God and a dwelling for the Holy Trinity, and where God is, there exists everything which the believer needs. **There are hindrances to prayer, the matter which St. Peter referred to by saying "That your prayers may not be hindered"** (1 Peter 3:7). **Perhaps the strongest hindrances to prayer are the desires entrenched in the heart. St. Nelles of Sinai said "A tied person cannot run, and the mind attached to desires does not find a place for a spiritual prayer. Moreover, he is always caught and pulled here and there by lustful thoughts".**

How true is the expression of the Prophet Isaiah "Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; nor His ear heavy, that it cannot hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear" (Isaiah 59:1, 2). The Divine Revelation expressed that in different words on the tongue of the Prophet Ezekiel saying "Son of man, these men **have set up their idols in their hearts**, ... Should I let Myself be inquired of at all by them?" (Ezekiel 14:3). How precise is the Divine Revelation in this last verse **"Have set up their idols in their hearts"!!!, and how numerous are the desires which have got hold on our hearts by our wills, which the Divine Revelation calls the "Idols".**

The pure heart is not only the one purified from sin, but also which is not divided on itself. We mean the heart which wavers between the love of the world and the love of God. This is what God meant and emphasized in His saying "And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart" (Jeremiah 29:13). David the Great said "With my whole heart I have sought You" (Psalm 119:10).

How numerous are the blessings which we receive by prayer uttered from a pure heart. **St. Isaac said "The altar upon which the sacraments are offered has to be designated and dedicated, for the offerings to become the living sacrifice of the Flesh and Blood of our Lord, not simple bread and unacceptable sacrifice, even if the High priest offers many prayers on it. This is like the altar of the inner heart, which is not purified and not complemented by the light of the lack of pains (sins), and sanctified by the presence of the Holy Spirit".**

2 - ACCORDING TO THE WILL OF GOD:

John the beloved of the Lord Jesus said **"If we ask anything according to His will, He hears us"** (1 John 5:14). That is, everything we ask should be according to His perfect love and

wisdom. God Who commands us to ask and Who promises us that he answers, does not forsake His wisdom because of our ignorance, in case we ask something which is not useful for us for example!! "For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought" (Romans 8:26). It happens sometimes that we ask and pray with urgency and fervour for something, as the matter appears clear in our eyes and we seem justified in asking for it, but God does not answer us. Yet later on, we find that it was better that God denied us such requests.

In this case we resemble a young boy who cries with tears asking for a harmful thing, such as a pointed edged piece of metal whose bright colour attracted him. But no doubt, it is the love of his father which denies him this piece of metal. **St. John Chrysostom said** "God knows exactly the time in which if He gives us something, it will be most useful for us. The child cries, protests and gets angry to get hold of a knife, and the love of the parents refuse giving it to him. This is how God deals with us. He gives us better than we ask for".

There is another matter which St. Paul attracts our attention to, concerning this point, which shows our ignorance as how to pray. He assures us that in our weakness and our inability to see properly, we get the help of the Holy Spirit Who "intercedes for the saints" - but even the Holy Spirit Who is God Himself, makes this intercession - as the Apostle explains - according to the will of God "Now He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because **He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God**" (Romans 8:27).

Someone may say why do I pray then as long as I do not know what is the will of God. Let me leave the matter to God Who is perfect in goodness and wisdom, and Who knows my needs. But the Lord Jesus in **His parable about the persistent widow and the unjust city judge** (Luke 18:1-8), taught us to be persistent in prayer, and "**that men always ought to pray and not lose heart**" (Luke 18:1). The Lord Jesus in His prayer in the Garden in the night of His suffering, asked His Father three times to take this cup away from Him; but He added by saying "Nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done" (Luke 22:42). Let us then ask whatever we want from God, beseeched by the same wish "Nevertheless not my will, but Yours, be done". Let us pray from a heart full of the spirit of submission, which is what the Lord taught us in the Lord's prayer when we say "**Your will be done**" (Luke 11:2).

3 - IN THE NAME OF THE LORD JESUS:

In His last speech in the Upper Room, the Lord Jesus - as recorded by St. John the Evangelist - commanded His Disciples, time and again, in remarkable repetition, to always in

their prayers ask "in His name", and this is how their prayers are answered. Five times, the Lord requested His disciples to present their prayers in His name:

"And whatever **you ask in My name**, that I will do", ... **"If you ask anything in My name**, I will do it" (John 14:13, 14)... **"That whatever you ask the Father in My name** He may give you" (John 15:16)... **"Until now you have asked nothing in My name**. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full" (John 16:24)... **"In that day you will ask in My name"** (John 16:26).

Not only the asking is presented in "His Blessed Name", but the answer of the request also, is given in the power of His Holy Name. We notice that the Lord Jesus said to His Disciples **"In that day"** (John 16:23). This phrase related to His previous speech (John 16:7-16), in which He spoke about His promise of sending the Holy Spirit and about the Spirit's work. Thus when Jesus said **"In that day"**, He meant the time when the Holy Spirit would have descended on the believers, and not before "that day", because without the Spirit of God we can do nothing. In the beginning, everything was waiting for the day of Pentecost, and now also everything depends on the work of the Holy Spirit in us. Everything depends on the Holy Spirit. Without the Holy Spirit, we do not even have the strength to confess His Lordship "No one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:3).

Yet what is the meaning of praying in the name of Jesus, and why should I present my prayers in His Name?

It is known that man was in a state of enmity with God before the Salvation which was completed by Christ. Then he was reconciled to God through the death of His Son (Romans 5:10). However, this reconciliation collapses when he commits sin which offends God, as the Apostle says "For the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). Thus the peace and the atmosphere of this reconciliation is upset by Man's sins. A remote analogy would be, a man who attempts to withdraw some money from his account in a bank, when his account is empty. The employee of the bank will certainly refuse to give him any money. But if he presents a signed cheque of a person who has an account with positive balance in the bank, he will be able to cash this cheque. **Likewise, we do not deserve anything from our Heavenly Father, but we have immense merits in His Son Jesus Christ our Lord "Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus"** (Hebrew 10:19).

For this reason the Church presents all her petitions in this way "In Jesus Christ our Lord", "Through the grace, compassion and the love of mankind of Your Only Begotten Son our Lord, God and Saviour Jesus Christ ...". Indeed - when we do that - we remind God of His love, mercy, salvation and His death on our behalf which was completed by Christ and by Him. The Lord Jesus granted us to use His name, and to present our petitions to the

Heavenly Father in His name in order to receive through Him and from Him all our needs.

4 - IN COMPLETE OBEDIENCE:

The same Apostle John who spoke about the promises of God in answering our requests if they are according to His will, and are presented in His name, he notifies us about another condition which makes our prayers acceptable. He says **"Whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight"** (1 John 3:22). He explains to us the secret behind answering our prayers - that we live the life of believing obedience, "because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight".

Let us contemplate in the depth and strength of these blessed words **"Whatever we ask we receive from Him"**. There is neither a short nor a long prayer which is not capable of reaching its destination. The secret lies behind the words of the Apostle "Because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight".

We often ask: why do we not receive what we ask for in prayer? Why do we not say with the Apostle "Whatever we ask we receive from Him"? The reason is not that John was an Apostle and we are mere ordinary believers, but that John was able to keep God's commandment and do what pleases Him. Can we do likewise? The Lord Jesus said "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work" (John 4:34). How beautiful are the words which the Divine Revelation uttered on the tongue of Apostle Paul about the Lord Jesus "Then I said, Behold, I have come - in the volume of the book it is written of Me - to do Your will, O God" (Hebrews 10:7).

5 - WITH COMPLETE FAITH:

Apostle James said "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. **But let him ask in faith, with no doubting**, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord" (James 1:5-7). These words of the Apostle are practical explanation to the words of the Lord "For assuredly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, "Be removed and be cast into the sea", and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will come to pass, he will have whatever he says. Therefore I say to you, **whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will**

have them" (Mark 11:23, 24).

This is what St. Paul meant in his Epistle to the Hebrews "**Let us therefore come boldly** to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16), and this boldness which the Apostle sets as essential is faith itself (Hebrews 11:1).

Prayer without faith is powerless, as faith is among the bases which the Lord laid down - upon which - we present our petitions to Him. Faith is not the greatest virtue, as it is said "And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing" (1 Corinthians 13:2). Yet if faith is not the greatest virtue, it is the first virtue. Faith without love is nothing, and love without faith is impossible, because I cannot love who I do not trust (who I do not have faith in).

It is not necessary when we ask in faith, that we oblige God to answer our prayer. The whole of the Holy Bible should be understood in one accord. When we do not receive what we ask for, we should wait until God's plan is revealed. It is not for us "to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority" (Acts 1:7), and if our faith is a healthy faith, it will accompany patience with it.

Much was written about faith "for whatever is not from faith is sin" (Romans 14:23). "But without faith it is impossible to please Him" (Hebrews 11:6). **The Lord gave faith all the power to work and to receive ... and prayer has no power without faith.** Imagine with me that you went to a great person to ask him for something and you feel in your heart that this person is not able to do this job for you. Do you not consider this an insult to him? **When you want to know if your prayer is answered or not, ask your heart, as it is written "May He grant you according to your heart's desire, and fulfil all your purpose"** (Psalm 20:4).

St. John El-Dargy says "Faith is the wing of prayer. Without it prayer returns back to the person's bosom". John Cassian said "He is absolutely sure that his prayer is not answered!! Who is this miserable person? He is who prays and does not believe that he will receive an answer".

St. Augustine after reviewing the parable of the persistent widow and the unjust city judge, comments on the words of the Lord "When the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8) and says:

"If faith dies, the power of prayer stops, because who is he who prays to whom he does not believe in?" For this the Apostle said "Whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved"

(Romans 10:13), and to explain that faith is the source of prayer he continues "How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed?" (Romans 10:14). Hence we have to believe in order to pray, and in order for this faith not to perish, we have to pray. Faith generates prayer and the generation of prayer gives force - even to faith itself. Again in order that faith avoids temptations, the Lord said "Rise and pray, lest you enter into temptation" (Luke 22:46). What is entering into temptation except keeping afar from faith!! For this, the Lord said "Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail" (Luke 22:31, 32).

6 - WITH THANKSGIVINGS:

The Lord had repeated the command of thanksgiving many times in the Holy Bible; it is mentioned countless times in the Old Testament. Even among Temple presentations which a Jewish person should offer was the "Sacrifice of Thanksgiving". This matter is reiterated again in the New Testament.

God is saddened from the "lack of thanking Him", which is the sin of many. When the Lord cleansed the ten lepers, and only one of them came to thank Him, He said sorrowfully "Were there not ten cleansed? But where are the nine?" (Luke 17:17). How many times God looks sadly to us because of our lack of thanking Him for His abundant blessings.

The writings of Apostle Paul show a spirit of continuous thanksgivings, which he was careful to transmit to the believers. He commanded the believers of Ephesus to "**giving thanks always for all things**" (Ephesians 5:20). After that he speaks about the definite will of God "**In everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you**" (1 Thessalonians 5:18). **He said to the Colossians that if they were "rooted and built up in Him" and "established in the faith", they have to be "abounding in it with thanksgiving"** (Colossians 2:7).

Paul explains to us that thanksgiving is among the supporter of prayer and he says in his Epistle to the people of Colossi "Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving" (Colossians 4:2). He also wrote to the Philippians saying "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything **by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving**, let your requests be made known to God" (Philippians 4:6). On that depends a valuable promise "the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:7).

How little we thank God for His countless goodness, and how much we thank each other

for services we do one to the other. With different methods and ways we express our thanks and gratitude to people. At the same time we appear ungrateful and unappreciative to the Lord Who fills us from His blessings. It is good to thank our brethren, and even better to thank the First and the Greater Giver.

Our Church teaches us a lesson in the necessity and the spirit of thanksgiving. With the "Prayer of Thanksgiving", the Church begins all her worship and prayers; in raising of incense, liturgies, "Candel prayers", commemorations, weddings, funerals, and in baptism services. In all that she starts by the prayer of thanksgiving.

How deep are its words and expressions "Let us give thanks to the beneficent and merciful God, ..., for He has protected, aided, kept and accepted us, had compassion upon us, supported us and brought us to this hour, ..., we thank You on every occasion, in every condition and for all things ...".

Thanking God implies confessing His love, care, mercy and wisdom, and a declaration of submitting the life to Him. St. Nelles of Sinai says **"Prayer is an expression of joy and thanksgiving"**.

Thus let us have the spirit of thanksgiving in general, not only for our own sake, but also for the sake of everything else. Commanding his disciple Timothy, our teacher St. Paul says "Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, **and giving of thanks be made for all men, ... For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior**" (1 Timothy 2:1-3).

Yet we should not forget to give special thanks to God for every goodness He does to us. When we stand to pray, let us not offer God a general thanksgiving, but rather enumerate our thanksgivings according to His numerous goodness to us. **Our continuous thanksgiving to God, urges Him to give us more. St. Isaac said "There is no giving without extra giving, except that which lacks thanksgiving"**.

Let not our thanksgivings be limited to the things we asked from God and was answered, but also to the matters which we asked for and was not answered. In this case we thank God for His wisdom. St. John Chrysostom said "If we get or not get what we asked for, we should carry on praying. Let us thank - not only when we take, but also when we do not take, because we do not know what is good for us, but God knows. Therefore we should consider taking and the lack of taking as equal gifts and thank God for this and for that".

All capable men of prayer, in both the Holy Bible and in Church history, were men who gave themselves to thanksgiving and to giving glory God. **Among them is David the Great whose Psalms overflow with the spirit of thanksgivings to God...** "Bless the Lord, O my soul; and all

that is within me, bless His holy name!" (Psalm 103:1), "I will sing of the mercies of the Lord forever; with my mouth will I make known Your faithfulness to all generations" (Psalm 89:1), "I will extol You, my God, O King; and I will bless Your name forever and ever. Every day I will bless You, and I will praise Your name forever and ever" (Psalm 145:1, 2).

7 - WITH FORGIVENESS:

In the model prayer which the Lord gave to His Disciples, He explained that it is not permitted for us to ask forgiveness of our trespasses from God, without asking Him at the same time to forgive us in the same way and same degree by which we forgive those who trespassed against us. In the "Sermon on the Mount" He taught us to pray like that "And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" (Matthew 6:12).

After this model prayer He continued teaching us by saying "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matthew 6:14, 15). In order that no confusion occurs, the Lord Jesus revisited this subject in His last week on earth. After He spoke about prayer, He told His Disciples "And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses. **But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses**" (Mark 11:25, 26).

St. Nelles of Sinai said "Leave your gift there before the altar - says the Lord - and go and reconcile to your brother" (Matthew 5:24). After that, when you return you will pray without trouble, because hatred darkens man's mind and hides his prayer in the dark. Those who pray with sadness and hatred in themselves resemble he who pours water in a punctured bucket".

He also said "Let him who is in debt by ten thousand Dinaries teach you that if you do not forgive him who is in debt to you, your Lord will not forgive you. Because it is said "And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him"" (Matthew 18:34).

D) SECRET OF ANSWERED PRAYER

We spoke earlier about "Conditions of Acceptable Prayer", and mentioned some basic points for answered prayers. We wish here **to add some other points which multiply the power of prayer and speed its answering.**

(First) HUMILITY:

Humility of man in front of God multiplies the power of prayer, gives it closeness to Him and hastens its answer. Humility may be in any of its forms; lowliness of the heart or thought, fasting and what accompanies it from ascetic deeds, prostration, or tears. **Humility is not only a powerful means for aspiring God's pleasure but the Almighty also calls us to it on the tongue of the Prophet Joel** "Now, therefore, says the Lord, "Turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning". So rend your heart, and not your garments; return to the Lord your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness; and He relents from doing harm"" (Joel 2:12, 13).

(A) CONTRITION:

This was clear in the personality of Daniel as it was the reason for answering his request. When he was praying for Jerusalem and for the people in captivity, Daniel says about himself **"Then I set my face toward the Lord God to make request by prayer and supplications, with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes.** And I prayed to the Lord my God, and made confession, and said, O Lord, great and awesome God, ... we have sinned and committed iniquity, we have done wickedly and rebelled, even by departing from Your precepts and Your judgments... O Lord, righteousness belongs to You, but to us shame of face... O Lord to us belongs shame of face, to our kings, our princes, and our fathers, because we have sinned against You... O Lord, according to all Your righteousness, I pray, let Your anger and Your fury be turned away from Your city Jerusalem, Your holy mountain; because for our sins, and for the iniquities of our fathers, Jerusalem and Your people are a reproach to all those around us. Now therefore, our God, hear the prayer of Your servant, and his supplications,... for we do not present our supplications before You because of our righteous deeds, but because of Your great mercies. O Lord, hear! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, listen and act!" (Daniel 9:3-19).

Daniel continued in his humility and mourned for three weeks in which he did not eat appetizing food. Meat nor wine did not enter his mouth, and he did not anoint himself, until angel Gabriel appeared to him and told him **"Do not fear, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your heart to understand, and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard; and I have come because of your words"** (Daniel 10:12).

Ahab was an evil king as the Bible depicts him "But there was no one like Ahab who sold himself to do wickedness in the sight of the Lord" (1 Kings 21:25). Yet as soon as he heard the words of the Prophet Elijah concerning what will happen to him and his household from disasters "he tore his clothes and put sackcloth on his body, and fasted and lay in sackcloth, and went about mourning" (1 Kings 21:27). Then the Lord told Elijah "See how Ahab has humbled himself before Me? Because he has humbled himself before Me, I will not bring the calamity in his days; but in the days of his son..." (1 Kings 21:29). Hence we see the result of contrition and humility in prayer.

The saints spoke much about this matter. St. John Chrysostom said "The tax collector cried with a lowly and contrite heart saying, "God, be merciful to me a sinner!" Luke 18:13) and he went down from the presence of God justified rather than the Pharisee, and here the contrite prayer supersedes over the haughty deed! The Pharisee showed his piety by careful fasting and regular tithes, and the tax collector presented a broken heart without deeds. The Lord does not listen to words only, but perceives the feelings which form the words".

St. Isaac said "The grace of God stands always far away and watches man during prayer. If lowly thoughts move in him, at once it comes to him with countless helps. This occurs at the time of prayer more than any other time. Hence the devil wages attacks against man so that he does not come near God by his thoughts". The Lord said on the tongue of the Prophet Isaiah "But on this one will I look: on him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word" (Isaiah 66:2).

Contrition in front of God in prayer does not mean repeating the familiar phrases "we are sinners and do not deserve God's grace ..." but contrition is feeling it in our inner selves ... It is to realise our sins, insults and trespasses against our Holy God, and relate all what is good in us to Him. "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of light" (James 1:17). When we approach God in prayer we should fill our hearts and thoughts with such feelings. **St. Isaac says** "When you stand to pray in front of God, become like an ant in your thoughts, and like the flies on earth. Be like a talking child of God in order to be worthy of the fatherly care which is from the fathers to the male children ...".

(B) FASTING:

We have written a special chapter about fasting in the second part of this book (has been translated to the English language by St. Mark Coptic Orthodox Church in Chicago, U.S.A.), and spoke about the togetherness of fasting and prayer. We read about fasting with prayer in many parts of the Holy Bible. It is enough what the Lord of Glory said "**This kind (the devil) can come out by nothing but prayer and fasting**" (Mark 9:29). No doubt, fasting is an important means of humility, and if accompanied with prayer it gains more power. **St. Isaac said** "If the body is weakened by fasting and humility, the soul is encouraged by prayer and by the Spirit".

(C) WORSHIP (PROSTRATION)

It is among the strongest means by which we show our lowliness in front of God. The word "Matania" (prostration) used in the Coptic Church is of Greek origin and means penitence. **Prostration is a true expression of submission and contrition, in which body and soul together worship God.** If our prostration is with the spirit and with contrition, it is well accepted by God. The Lord Jesus said "For the Father is seeking such to worship Him" (John 4:23) and St. Paul said "That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth" (Philippians 2:10). This is expressed by St. Cyril the Great in his Liturgy "God to whom every knee bows of things in heaven and things on earth and things under the earth. Unto whom every man is subjected and is in bond of servitude, bowed to the sceptre of Your Kingdom".

Doing Matanias (Prostrations) is a superb means of worship and prayer. However, bowing down the body to the ground by itself is not sufficient; as it should be accompanied by short prayers and supplications in which one presents the feelings of his heart, every time the body bows down to the ground.

For example, a person who is in certain difficulty, or a man overpowered by a certain sin, or in need of help, each of them prostrates with a feeling full of humility. Each time one bows down, he crosses himself by the sign of the cross then presents his short supplication. He might repeat it by the same words or by another expression. As an example, a young man who is defeated in his body says "My Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me, help me and give me quietness in my body... My Lord Jesus Christ stop the unrest of the body... My Lord Jesus Christ purify my heart, and my thought and secure my members... **I sinned against You my Lord Jesus Christ,** have mercy on me and break the power of the enemy for me ... etc", and he bows down to the ground quietly without rushing.

St. Isaac said about the "Matania" bows "There is nothing loved by God, honored in the eyes of the angels, weakens Satan, feared by the devils, defeats sin, overflows knowledge, attracts mercy, eliminates sins, attains humility, controls the heart, brings about comfort, and by which the mind is renewed, as to find a believer always kneeling to the ground praying".

St. John Saba (The Spiritual Elder) said "Endeavour to prostrate in front of God because it is He Who moves the spirit of prayer in you. Do not think that bowing down in front of God is an easy matter. There is no good deed which parallels the regular ending of the prayer service by the "Matanias" (prostrations). If thoughts trouble us during prayer and we feel bored, let us bow down to the ground with the book of prayer in our hands and ask God as we are bowing down to give us enthusiasm to finish the service of prayer".

John Cassian described the monks of Egypt saying "In their prayers as they finish reciting each psalm, they do not rush in their prostration, not as a duty they wish to finish, as many of us do now. On the contrary, after reciting the psalm they wait for a while in which they say a short prayer, and bow down to the ground, in reverence with much homage and great piety. Then they gently and actively stand up again with all their thoughts concentrated in the prayer".

Also St. Basil the Great said "Each time we bow down to the ground we remember how sin pulled us down to the ground, and when we stand up again, we confess the grace of God and His mercy which lifted us up from the ground and gave us inheritance in heaven".

At the end of this point we should not forget to remind the person who prays not to practice the "Matanias" in any way he likes and not to decide upon the number of "matanias", but he should do that with the advice of his spiritual father.

(D) TEARS:

Finally we come to the mighty weapon which could not be defeated; "tears", the Strong Mighty God is overcome with tears. The groom said to the bride in the Book of Songs "Turn your eyes away from me, for they have overcome me" (Songs 6:5). The eyes lifted to God are never defeated. For this reason we read many phrases by David in the Psalms signifying that he used this weapon.

David the man of prayer experienced the tears and knew their power, as he often spoke about the tears in the psalms ... "I am weary with my groaning; all night I make my bed swim; I drench my couch with my tears" (Psalm 6:6), "The Lord has heard the voice of my weeping" (Psalm 6:8), "Hear my prayer, O Lord, and give ear to my cry; do not be silent at my tears" (Psalm 39:12), "Because zeal for Your house has eaten me up, and the reproaches of those

who reproach You have fallen on me. When I wept and chastened my soul with fasting, ... I also made sackcloth my garment; I became a byword to them" (Psalm 69:9-11). No wonder that David knew the power of the tears and how he used them. We hear him in another psalm saying "**Put my tears into Your bottle; Are they not in Your book?**" (Psalm 56:8).

Men of God in every generation, used their tears as a means of humility to get what they wanted from God. This is what **Job the pious did** "I have sewn sackcloth over my skin, and laid my head in the dust. My face is flushed from weeping" (Job 16:15, 16). **The Prophet Ezra** prayed and while he was confessing, weeping, and bowing down before the house of God, a very large assembly of men, women, and children gathered to him from Israel; for the people wept very bitterly (Ezra 10:1).

Jeremiah the weeping prophet, the author of "The Lamentations" had a wish; "Oh, that my head were waters, and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night" (Jeremiah 9:1). **Hezekiah the king of the Jews** wept bitterly when he was sick. The Lord answered his tears on the tongue of Isaiah saying "I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; surely I will heal you" (2 Kings 20:1-5). **There are many of such examples to the extent that the Psalmist made from it a general rule for joy and delight "Those who sow in tears shall reap in joy"** (Psalm 126:5). Even the Lord Himself calls us on the tongue of the Prophet Joel saying "Now, therefore, says the Lord, "Turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning"" (Joel 2:12).

For this reason the Lord blessed the weeping eyes "Blessed are you who weep now" (Luke 6:21). He had compassion on the widow of Nain and said to her "Do not weep" (Luke 7:13). Also the sinful woman who stood at His feet behind Him weeping deserved forgiveness of her sins (Luke 7:38, 47). Again Peter, the Disciple who denied his Master and Teacher obtained forgiveness as he wept bitterly (Matthew 26:69-75, John 21:15-19).

The relation between tears and prayer is described by St. John El-Dargy "Tears are the mother and daughter of prayer"!!! Tears lead us to the fountains of prayer where we are entrusted on the live fountains of tears. It is also one of the gifts of the contrite prayer.

However, we should beware of pride in this case. The saint Anba Oghreese says "If you have a fountain of tears in your prayer, beware not to become proud in your heart as if you were better than the rest of the people. Tears are help which you took from God so that you can actively confess your sins in front of Him, and through them, your heart convinces you that they are forgiven. Do not exchange the help you took by pains (sins), else you anger He Who gave you this gift". **How much did the saints say about tears, from their own personal experiences.**

St. Aphram El-Soriany said "Pour tears in front of God so that your prayers become like incense in front of Him. Current of water is needed for fire and current of tears for the time of temptation. Water quenches the flames of fire and tears put off evil desires".

St. John El-Dargy says "The weeping eye is a constant font for the baptism of repentance and renewal". **St Isaac said** "Blessed are those who weep for righteousness sake, because by their tears they always see the face of God". **The saint Anba Oghreese says** "Use tears when you ask for what you desire, because the Lord is exceedingly joyous with the prayer with tears, rejoices for it and quickly answers it".

So much for what tears do. They turn back God's wrath, deliver from difficulties, save from death, and attract astray souls from the core of destruction. **Among the best examples about that is St. Augustine,** whose mother Monica kept shedding tears for him. St. Ambrose Bishop of Milan who once saw her weeping bitterly was right when he said to her "Woman, trust that the son of these tears can never perish"!!. For this reason the Church urges her children to be diligent to ask for tears from God. This is expressed in the second part of the Midnight Prayer where one prays saying "Give me Lord fountains of tears as You did in the past to the sinful woman. Make me worthy to shed my tears on Your feet which took me to the right path ...".

(Second) PERSISTENCE AND PERSEVERANCE:

There is no contradiction between God's words and His promises. God has promised us to answer our requests if we ask them with faith, but on the other side He is sometimes slow in answering them. He wants us to be persistent in asking, and persevere in demanding them, so that He beautifies us and makes us among the men of prayer. No doubt, persistence and perseverance are expressions of faith, and nothing pleases the heart of God more than faith. In the story of the Canaanite woman the Lord Jesus appears as if He is dismissing this woman with a kind of contempt, and in spite of that she did not leave but continued asking with persistence and perseverance. Christ did not fail her persistence and perseverance. On the contrary He praised her behaviour telling her "O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire" (Matthew 15:28) and her daughter was healed from that very hour.

The Lord Jesus teaches us this lesson clearly in two parables: The first is of the friend at midnight (Luke 11:5-8) and the second is of the persistent widow and the unjust city judge (Luke 18:1-8). It is useful to write down these parables as were told by the Lord, for what they have from deep meanings. **In the parable of the friend at midnight He said:**

"Which of you shall have a friend, and go to him at midnight and say to him, "Friend, lend

me three loaves; for a friend of mine has come to me on his journey, and I have nothing to set before him" and he will answer from within and say, "Do not trouble me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot rise and give to you?" I say to you, though he will not rise and give to him because he is his friend, yet **because of his persistence** he will rise and give him as many as he needs" (Luke 11:5-8).

In this parable, the Lord explains that the giver did not give because of the friendship but because of the persistence!! The Lord continued openly, definitely and clearly saying "**So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you**" (Luke 11:9).

He spoke these words with their power and spirit in the "Sermon on the Mount" (Matthew 7:7). Unfortunately, the translation of these words do not carry the same meaning as in the Greek text. In Greek they read "Continue asking, continue demanding, continue knocking"!! clearly meaning that the Lord wants us to ask with persistence and perseverance.

The second parable about persistence, is the parable of the persistent widow and the unjust judge. It is introduced by St. Luke the Evangelist by saying "Then He spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart" (Luke 18:1). Then St. Luke says "There was in a certain city a judge who did not fear God nor regard man. Now there was a widow in that city; and she came to him, saying, "Get justice for me from my adversary". And he would not for a while; but afterward he said within himself, "Though I do not fear God nor regard man, yet because this widow troubles me I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me". Then the Lord said, "Hear what the unjust judge said. And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them? I tell you that He will avenge them speedily"" (Luke 18:2-8).

Numerous are the comforts and blessings which the Lord reveal by this parable. When God compares Himself with the unjust judge who avenged the widow because of her persistence He explains to us in a lucid way how He must answer he who persists and perseveres in demanding. God puts Himself on one side of the scale and the unjust judge on the other side. If the unjust judge responded to the persistence of the woman, would God not?! The Lord Jesus answers this query by saying "He will avenge them speedily" (Luke 18:8). How beautiful are these words for those who wait on the Lord.

St. Augustine comments on the parable of the unjust judge and says "The Lord Jesus Who is with us, would not urge us in this way unless he is willing to give. He is willing to give more than we are ready to take. If the Lord Jesus is not willing to give He would not have said this parable about persistence and showed its importance. What encourages us to pray more than the

parable of the unjust judge? This unjust judge did not fear God nor regard man, and in spite of that listened to a widow who pleaded with him and he was overcome because of her persistence not because of his compassion! If he who does not want to be asked listened to her pleading, how much more God who urges us to ask, listens to us!!".

To pass judgement on a certain job, needs to wait until the job is finished. A good start is not good enough for passing judgement, but the finish is. If Apostle James said that patience has its perfect work (James 1:4), that teaches us that persistence is a necessary virtue, without which no other virtue bears fruits.

St. Basil the Great said "If your request is according to the will and the pleasure of God, do not stop asking until you get it. In order to attract our attention to that, the Lord Himself told us the parable of the man who got bread at midnight from his friend by persistence. He said that we ought not lose heart in our prayer (Luke 18:1) even for many years, and even when our request seems impossible in the eyes of all men, because the things which are impossible with men are possible with God (Luke 18:27)".

He also said "God knows what we need and He gives us all the bodily needs without asking, as He shines His sun on the righteous and the wicked. But faith, righteousness, virtue and the kingdom, because of His goodness, He is slow to give so that man does not get them except by demanding, asking, striving, different pains and great patience. Because He wants us to love goodness and search for it eagerly and earnestly so that we become the cause for the giving and that after we get it we hold it and guard it because of the toil and big striving which we spent in getting it".

St. Isaac says "**If you do not have the virtue of persistence, do not expect to receive real comfort in your prayer, because persistence is equivalent to work. Every striving such as praying, fasting, or toil without persistence does not bring forth fruit,** and at the end of your striving, you are as if you just started. The possibility of falling is always expected, and thus God urges us to pray regularly and to be persistent in asking and demanding".

He also said "Sometimes we ask from God and do not receive. This is fitting because we do not ask regularly and with patience in prayers and without dare and trust, and we do not practice His clear saying "Who cry for Him day and night", but wait for Him to give us by Himself. However, He Himself waits for us to give Him a cause and a means by which He gives us what we desire Him to grant us. For this He leaves us tormented and waits for us to knock His door and continue asking with persistence".

E) ENCOURAGEMENT FOR PRAYER

(1) QUIETNESS

Is in the forefront among the means which encourage praying; quietness internally and externally. What is meant is quietness from all angles, inside and outside one's self. We shall not speak about the life of quietness on higher level in the understanding of the saints such as the quietness of senses, quietness of the soul, quietness of the thoughts and quietness of the spirit. **But we consider the quietness as related to the subject of prayer.**

The person who lives in continuous noise does not know how to pray well, and he whose heart wavers with thoughts and different desires cannot pray as he ought to. We thus need quietness. We wrote a separate chapter about "Retreat" in part 2 of this book "Paradise of the Spirit", in the Arabic language (has been translated to the English language by St. Mark Coptic Orthodox Church in Chicago, U.S.A.).

About external quietness, because man is formed from spirit and body, and not from spirit only, he is affected to a great extent by the surrounding atmosphere. We thus read about Christ that He often went alone to a desolate place. **St. John Chrysostom** comments on the verse of St. Matthew "And when He had sent the multitudes away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray. Now when evening came, He was alone there" (Matthew 14:23): **"Why did He go up on the mountain? To teach us that being apart and alone are good when we pray to God. Likewise we often see Him retreat to the wilderness and there He spends all night long in prayer, teaching us to eagerly search for quietness for our prayer** whether in time or in space. The wilderness is the mother of stillness (quietness). It is a quiet haven which relieves us from all our burdens".

There is an vivid story in the book "Paradise of the monks" about a disciple who went to his teacher complaining about his scattered thoughts in prayer and the lack of feeling of any comfort. The experienced elder brought some water in a container and dropped a pebble in it which created waves in the water. The teacher asked his disciple to see his face in the water, and the disciple answered that he saw shadows. The teacher waited until the water calmed down and asked him again to see his face. The disciple replied "I see my face as in a mirror". The teacher advised him saying "Likewise my son go and quieten yourself down and you find comfort in prayer".

For this reason the saints loved the life of quietness and knew that the spiritual life is fruitful within it. Perhaps this is what Christ meant by His saying "When you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, ... " (Matthew 6:6). **St. Augustine** comments on this verse by saying "These rooms are none other than our hearts themselves as is mentioned in the Psalms "Meditate within your heart on your bed" (Psalm 4:4). It is easy to enter into the rooms of our senses, but what is meant here are the spiritual rooms in our inner self".

John Cassian said "Before every thing we have to carefully observe the principles of the Bible which guide us to proper prayer: we enter our room, close the door and pray. But how do we realize that matter practically? Is it not by isolating the worldly thoughts and the vain concerns and enter into a close fellowship with the Lord? **And what is the meaning of the closed door in prayer? Is it not stillness, the complete holy quietness, and the humble closed worshipping lips in front of Him Who tests the hearts?!"** (Psalm 7:9).

If prayer blends with quietness it produces many spiritual fruits. **St. Isaac said** "As we advance everyday, we not only find God's hope but also find true faith and real love, not remembering evil, brethren love, piety and patience, inner enlightenment, deliverance from temptations, spiritual gifts, hearty thanksgivings, sorrowful tears, bearing accidental difficulties, true forgiveness to our relative, recognition of spiritual commands and presence of God's justice, descent of the Holy Spirit, gifts and spiritual treasures. **God donates us all that through quietness. For obtaining these, one desires quietness!"**.

(2) SPIRITUAL READINGS:

There is a strong link between spiritual readings and prayer, that the Fathers said their famous expression "Reading is the source of fragrant (pure) prayer". Spiritual readings help to straighten prayer. For this reason Apostle Paul commanded his disciple Timothy "Give attention to reading" (1 Timothy 4:13). Spiritual readings are in two parts: reading the books of the

Holy Bible and reading spiritual books in general.

The life of the Lord Jesus gives us an idea about the value of the "Word" in our lives. In the temptation on the mountain, and in every situation He was subjected to, until He cried out on the cross "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Mark 15:34) (these words are the beginning of psalm 22), He taught us how much we should keep the word of God in our hearts and with it reinforce ourselves against our enemies. **For this reason St. Eronimos** advices a woman disciple of his called Yostikhion saying "Do not fall asleep without your hand holding the Book for reading and if you sleep and your face falls down, let it fall over the Holy Bible".

We may find out the effect of spiritual readings on prayer from what **St. Isaac wrote** according to his experience in this area. He said:

+ **"Thoughts are formed from readings, yet what is gained; chastity, modesty and purity are but from prayer"**.

+ **"Reading makes the inner self a new creation.** And from prayer, a new life is breathed in it, and divine heat inflames the mind at all times to fly away from earthly matters and dwell in the house of life".

+ "Keep this inside your conscience always and understand the reason all the time when the heat in your heart lessens. If you read the books, your thoughts will no more be scattered. Then return back to prayer by which the mind soars high".

+ **"Reading opens the mind to understanding,** and by understanding the desire for prayer is awakened".

+ **"If conscience is engaged in reading and prayer with piety, evil thoughts are not planted and one avoids all the traps of the devils"**.

+ "When your thought is scattered, engage yourself in reading more than in prayer".

+ "Engage in reading if you can, because it is the source and helper of pure prayer".

+ "The heat of the soul is created from continuous reading, and from quietness accompanied by work and frequent prayer".

+ "Good prayers if mixed with continuous discernible reading, deliver us to the deep meditation of the mind".

+ "When man approaches prayer, remembering what he read inflames him by the proper understanding of the words said about the Almighty ...".

(3) TOIL AND STRIVING:

St. Aghathon was once asked "Which virtue is greater than striving?" He answered "There is no better striving than to always pray to God. Because if man wants to pray all the time, **the devils try to prevent him because they know that nothing cancels their force except prayer to God. Every effort one spends and toils in life, he must finally reap comfort from it, except prayer. He who prays needs always to strive to the last breath in his life**".

St. Macarius the Great said "He who accompanies prayer needs more striving than in other works. He should always be watchful, patient, and toils regularly, because the evil one carries on his animosity, brings him sleep, laziness, heaviness of body, looseness and boredom, different thoughts, scattered mind, and many devices, trying by that to stop the prayer. For this reason one needs to strive till the blood against those who try to keep the soul far from God".

St. Nelles of Sinai said "Every war between us and the evil spirits is because of spiritual prayer. For them, it is the most harmful spiritual weapons and for us the most useful".

The sayings of those saints clearly picture for us the nature of prayer and the necessity for continuous striving. As prayer has many blessings, it requires striving. The road of worship is hard and difficult, described by Christ as narrow is its gate and difficult is its way!! (Matthew 7:14). This fact is stressed by the saying of St. Paul "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. ... Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints" (Ephesians 6:12, 18).

There is an important principle in the spiritual life known by the Fathers as the "striving" principle. It is not an easy principle to implement as some imagine. We do not get any thing in life without effort, toil, and sweat, specially if it is a valuable thing and difficult to obtain.

The student, the merchant, and the farmer, all of them do not get what they want without striving and toil. Likewise, we do not deserve the kingdom unless we strive for it according to the

law.

We do not try to make the road difficult nor we portray God in an image which is not His. **The best example which explains to us the striving in prayer, is that of our Lord Jesus Christ** who often spent whole nights in prayer, and Who prayed more fervently in the garden of Gethsemane until His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground (Luke 22:44). How much we read about the striving of the saints in prayer and how much are the blessings and gifts they deserved.

Here are some sayings by St. Isaac about striving in prayer and its blessings:

+ "When you have the desire to work, is it for the bodily food only, or do you strive, even if you do not have the desire to work? Realise that striving to work is a very important rule in both worldly and spiritual lives. It is necessary for prayer, for reading the holy and the spiritual books and for attending the divine services in the church. **Do not give way to the lazy body which is full of sin.** The body desires to rest always, not aware of the eternal destruction which is the alternate for its small vanishing rest".

+ "Every prayer for which the body does not toil, and in which the heart did not grieve, is like lifeless afterbirth".

+ "Adam have been working and toiling on earth for five thousand years until the time of the saints arrived as the Apostle said. The Lord came with His grace in the last days and commanded our nature to substitute sweat for sweat, but did not command it to stop working. Because of His compassion upon us and of our toil on earth, He showed us to change this to that. If you reduce the sweat in prayer, necessarily you will reap thorns and pains (sins), for idleness in the toil in prayer".

Yet if prayer is accompanied with toil alone and stops there, man cannot continue his ways in prayer. But thanks be to God, **the more we toil and the more we intend to toil, the more the Divine Help comes to support us.**

There are many experiences by St. Isaac in this matter; He said:

+ "By the same measure one labours, struggles and strives for the sake of God, Divine help is sent to him, surrounds him, facilitates his struggle and paves the road for him. If you ask to what extent I strive? I tell you till death for the sake of God. It is more suitable for us

to die striving than to live falling"!!

+ "If you read the Divine Word and pray and bear no fruit as a result, but feel wondering about, know that there is a great darkness inside you. The remedy to this situation comes from the work of prayer. If one strives and continues to strive, soon in a short time he will feel the help which comes from prayer".

+ "**Reflect on the benefits of striving.** How great it is to find a person kneeling in prayer with his hands stretched to heaven, his face looking to the cross of Christ, and his movements and thought concentrated in God in prayer. Since he is pleading to God, a sweet source of life will suddenly move in his heart, and his members will relax. As his eyes close and he turns his face to the ground, his thoughts change and he is unable to bow down from the joy in all his body".

+ "Think man! Did you not read that unless you strive you do not find, and if you do not always knock on the door fervently and watchfully you are not heard. Be patient upon the darkness of pains and be regular in reading the Holy Books. Continue your striving prayer, and as you push yourself to it, the Grace will come to you without you realising it.

+ "As one strives for the sake of Almighty God, his heart would be earnest in prayer".

+ "**From the striving prayer presented with sorrow, submission and lowliness in heart, is created the prayer of the willing grace accompanied with sadness and comfort"**.

+ "**If in the beginning, one does not feel help in prayer due to his ignorance, he should not be weary and bored"**. The farmer does not expect the fruits as soon as he sows the seeds. **Yet the farmer is pleased when he eats the fruits of his sweat"**.

Striving in prayer, as we said, is hard and tiring. But the believer does it because of the blessings accompanied with it. It is comforting to know that the effort of striving is not required to the end; since what you do with effort now, you will be able to do later with comfort and without much effort. **St. Macarius the Great said "The person who desires to come to the Lord should be regular in pray and strive to be humble. As one toils for His sake and does that with unwilling tired heart, one day he will be able to do it easily, willingly and with comfort.** This is how one trains himself for the life of goodness and caring for the Lord".

F) DELAY IN ANSWERING PRAYER

It is useful for us to understand well all God's promises, not just some of them and ignore the rest, else we become doubtful and helpless. As an example, someone who focuses on the promises of God to answer prayers without realising that there are factors which delay answering them and may be for our benefit. In spite of that he becomes distressed and doubtful because he focused on the idea of answering prayer by itself.

Let us appreciate the fatherhood of God to us, which is loving, wise and giver of all goods. Let us know that all what happens to us is for our good because it is from Him "The Beneficial".

St. John Chrysostom said "Prayer is a great blessing if we realise it fittingly, thanking God whether we get what we ask for or not. **For when God gives or does not give, He does that for your good.** When you are granted your request, it is obvious that you took. And when you do not obtain your request, you have also taken, as undoubtedly you did not take what is harmful to you. Not obtaining what is harmful signifies that you are granted what is good. Therefore whether you get what you ask for or not, give thanks to God trusting Him that He always gives us what we ask for, unless it is better for us not to get it".

From what St. Isaac said, there are more than one reason for the delay in answering

prayer:

+ **"If God does not answer you for sometimes, as you ask and do not shortly get, do not be distressed. You are not wiser than God.** It may be because your deeds are not worthy of your request, or because the capacity of your heart is not up to the greatness of what you pray for. You may be in fact like a child beside the great matters your request". God may delay answering you for a wise reason He sees. **As an example:** Zacharias and Elizabeth prayed God to give them children. Although they were righteous before God (Luke 6:1), but God delayed his answer until He honored them by the birth of John the Baptist who deserved to be the angel who went before the face of the Lord to prepare the ways for the Lord of Glory (Luke 1:76) and deserved the title "The greatest among those born of women" (Matthew 11:11)!!

+ **Both St. Basil the Great and St. Isaac agree** that the delay in answering prayer may sometimes be due the fact **that what we easily receive we do not properly value and we soon lose.** Yet what does not come easily and quickly, but with toil and effort and after sometimes, we guard. St. Isaac says "It is not proper that great and lofty things descend easily in our hands, else the gift of God be abused because of the ease of obtaining it. Everything which is easily found, easily it disappears, and everything obtained with toil, is carefully guarded and kept".

+ **Granting our request may not be for our benefit,** and thus we do not receive it from God, the Lover of mankind. **In that St. Isaac says** "Not every desire which appears good for man, is useful for him. This desire may be from the devil and it appears useful!! Thus we should pray continuously about this desire which moves inside us and appears good".

+ **The Love of God may decide to delay answering the prayer and request so that we come closer to Him and be diligent and persist in our request.** **St. Isaac said** "For this reason (feeling of one's weakness), the kind God holds His gift from man, so that he comes nearer to Him and because man's need makes him attends his Giver. If we are just waiting for God's help in a certain matter and we do not get it, it would be because we do not come near enough to Him in prayer and do not cry to him painfully and bitterly day and night. Yet for Him, He looks intently for a reason by which we approach Him, and so He leaves us suffering. His delay in answering is to make us persistent in knocking on His door to benefit us by asking. On the other hand, when we receive, we stop and defer asking and become weary, bored and colder than water".

This is stressed by John Cassian on the tongue of father Isaac when he says "We know from blessed Daniel - that he was heard the first day he was praying, but he did not receive his request for twenty one days. The angel said to him, "Do not fear, Daniel, **for from the first day** that you set your heart to understand, and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard; and I have come because of your words"" (Daniel 10:1).

We also, should not be lax in our prayers which we began. The delay in answering could be because of God's wisdom, or that the angel who brings us God's blessings have been delayed by the evil one - as what happened in the case of Daniel. The angel cannot deliver God's grace if he finds us slack in asking diligently. This was going to be in the case of Daniel, had he not been continuous in his prayer for twenty one days.

+ **St. Isaac explains the secret of the delay in answering prayer that it is for our spiritual benefit in general.** He says "God, the Master of all does not see our request as too much in relation to the bottomless sea of His mercies. It would be hypocritical and sinful to think that. But by continuous asking and the sorrow of our heart, we become enlightened and obtain comfort in the necessary matters from the continuous bargaining".

G) HOW DO WE PRAYER?

(1) BODY POSTURE AND PRAYER:

It is wrong to think that there is no relation between body posture and prayer. Body posture does much for keeping the mind attentive during prayer. We often hear about the power of the mind on matter, but not much about the effect of matter on the mind, and this is wrong!! Man is not made of mere spirit, but of spirit and body, and each affects the other. Added to that, **the body posture during prayer signifies how much we honor, revere and humble ourselves in front of God,** which would be a cause for answering our prayers and receiving divine blessings and spiritual gifts.

St. Isaac explains this matter and calls it "The good dress during prayer". He said "According to the reverence man shows during prayer by his body and conscience, he finds pure feelings and illumination in prayer and becomes worthy of great grace from above".

+ "By caring for "the good dress"; modesty during prayer, extending the two hands towards heaven, quiet standing and falling down by one's face to the ground worshipping, which beautify the prayers by these means always, one would soon be worthy of the work of the Holy Spirit".

+ "Know dear brothers that God - in all what is done for His sake - desires that we appear

well dressed and show respect, modesty and care, not only for His own sake but also for our benefit. Such matters neither benefit nor harm Him, but are for our good".

+ **"Many make mistake by thinking that it is enough to pray from the heart only and that God does not want anything else from us. They may be laying on their backs or sitting disrespectfully, praying from inside only. They do not care to beautify their outside action, stand well according to the strength of the body, prepare their senses and worship to the ground like somebody who approaches a flame of fire.** They should prepare themselves well respectfully from both inside and outside, by all body members, with solemn faces showing honor and respect for God. Else they deliver themselves to iniquity and sin as they do not realise the slyness of the devil".

Showing such respect by standing, kneeling, or raising hands is not obligatory for all such as the weak and the sick who form a special case. St. Isaac says "God is merciful, compassionate and good. He does not judge us according to what we cannot do because of our weaknesses, though blamed for, but according to what we can do and we neglect to do".

He also said **"I do not mean to offend the sick and the feeble in body that they should be under this law,** and that man should do what he cannot do, but I say that all we do should be in fear, trembling and reverence. What is because of necessity - even outside the limit of the law - and against the custom, is like the chosen Corban (sacrifice) which God accepts. One should not be blamed, but even the trivial things one does with good intention for His sake, God accepts as great things. If one does that in a way contrary to the essential, he is mercifully treated by God Who knew the liability of our nature before He created us".

In this respect, we should not forget to mention some of the deceits of the devil by which he intrudes into the lives of the children of God concerning prayer. We mentioned above, that the weak and the sick have a special rule in their labour in prayer. From personal experience and from the sayings of the saintly fathers and their lives we know that each of the body and the devil has its own deceit. The flesh which lusts against the Spirit (Galatians 5:17) does not want except rest and relaxation.

Sometimes, one feels weakness in his body, heavy members and headache if he decides to pray. This may be deceit from the lazy body, or a war from the devil. **There is an impressive story in the book "Paradise of the monks"** about a monk who when he attempted to pray, felt a fever, shivering accompanied with acute pains in the his head. But he used to tell himself "You miserable, you may die this moment, profit from your prayer before your death", and that is how he fulfilled his prayers. As soon as he finished his prayer the fever departed and the pains and shivering stopped. He suffered from this war for a long time, realising the means and deceits of the devil, but

he was faithful in finishing his prayers until finally the Lord delivered him from this war.

For this reason we should be diligent in our striving when we feel tired. We should discern the reason by discussing the matter with our spiritual fathers in the light of the lives of the saintly men of God.

There are different body postures for prayer. It is not possible to generalise them for everyone, but each exercises what is suitable for his heart's feelings during prayer.

+ **Standing in prayer is the common posture.** The Lord Jesus said "And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, ... " (Mark 11:25). When standing, it is common **to lift up the hands.** Prophet David said "Hear the voice of my supplications when I cry to You, **when I lift up my hands** toward Your holy sanctuary" (Psalm 28:2). St. Paul said "I desire therefore that the men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting" (1 Timothy 2:8).

+ **Kneeling and bowing down is suitable for confessing sins in front of God asking for His pardon and forgiveness, for those who wish to humble themselves,** as St. Paul says "For this reason **I bow my knees** to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named" (Ephesians 3:14, 15). The Psalmist also said "**Oh come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the Lord our Maker**" (Psalm 95:6). **The Lord Jesus Himself in the garden of Gethsemane knelt down and prayed** (Luke 22:41).

+ **There is a case of humility, contrition and spiritual striving, when one lies down on his face.** The Bible writes about **Moses and Aaron** - when God was very angry because of the sin of Korah, Dathan and Abiram - that "they fell on their faces, and said, "O God, the God of the spirits of all flesh, shall one man sin, and You be angry with all the congregation?" (Numbers 16:22). **The Lord Jesus Himself in the night of His suffering in the garden "fell on His face, and prayed"** (Matthew 26:39).

Also the eyes lifted up to God in prayer - even closed - have their relevance and effect. Prophet David says "Unto You I lift up my eyes, O You who dwell in the heavens" (Psalm 123:1). Lifting up the eyes of one's soul follows lifting up of one's eyes also "To You, O Lord, I lift up my soul" (Psalm 25:1). The eyes of the soul are lifted up to God when they stop looking to the earthly matters or material things, and start to despise man-made objects, and think in God alone. The eyes lifted up to God never fail "Turn your eyes away from me, for they have overcome me" (Song 6:5).

(2) PREPARING FOR PRAYER:

A person needs a period before prayer in which he prepares himself to the mood of prayer. A period of preparation is essential whether it is in the morning when the soul is still heavy from the effect of sleep and from thinking about the cares of a new day, or at the end of the day with its engagements.

St. Isaac says "Before you desire Him praying, prepare yourself with what is necessary". Before you start your prayer calm yourself down even for a little while, in order to prepare yourself for the mood of prayer, and to stir your emotions and feelings towards it. **It is not suitable to move directly from what you are busy with to prayer. Else you will not enjoy the prayer and you will have a dispersed mind, as it is still occupied with what you were doing few moments before.**

Reporting father Isaac, John Cassian said "Whatever occupies the mind before the hour of prayer, will necessarily come back to us during prayer via our active memory. Hence, the state we wish to be at the time of prayer should be the one we prepare ourselves for before the time of prayer. At the time of prayer, the mind is set in the state it was before prayer. When we pray, we see in front of our eyes the earlier scenes, words and thoughts which cause for us anger or depression or bring back our prior desires and activities. We may shiver from some imprudent laughs (which I would be ashamed to mention) as a result of an ugly joke. We again may laugh from a certain incident, or revisit our previous conversation. **Therefore if we do not want to be trapped by such things during prayer, we should be careful and take them out of our hearts".**

In this short period of quietness - five or ten minutes, or more according to your personal circumstance - try to raise up your spiritual temperature, by reading a chapter from the Bible - for comfort and not for study. For comfort means not to encounter certain difficulties during reading, but to postpone that to the time of your Bible study.

You may instead chant a comforting tune or hymn, or lift up your heart with a special meditation such as in the love of God to man and His graces to us, or meditate in the triviality of one's self, or in one's transgressions and sins, and how you offended God and still offend and anger Him.

In reality, one cannot follow one method. A person cannot always be in one spiritual and emotional state. Sometimes he is cheerful and happy and inclines to chant hymns, and sometimes he feels a particular comfort in keeping calm and quiet while the feelings of the heart are lifted up from inside. Some other times one longs for hope in God, and in this case it is not suitable to remember one's past sins, in order not to fall into depression, gloom and despair. He rather

meditates in the greatness of the mercies of God, ... etc.

There is one more nice feeling which we wish your heart to be filled with immediately before prayer. Make yourself feel that you are in the presence of God, that God sees and hears you, and that He is near you and looks to you with loving kindness. Let your heart be filled with this hope so that your prayer has wings with which you fly to the Master of all. Before you lift up your hands lift up your soul and say with the Prophet David "I lift up my soul to You" (Psalm 143:8), and before you lift up your hands lift up your heart.

There is another advice which St. Isaac gives saying "Before you pray draw the sign of the living cross on your heart and on your members. Stand still for a moment to let your feelings and motions calm down. After that lift up your inner eyes to the Lord and ask Him with anguish to strengthen your weakness by His grace". It is even better to accompany all what we said by bowing down, many times before prayer asking for the mercy of the Lord.

(3) CONTROLLING THE THOUGHTS DURING PRAYER:

"These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me" (Matthew 15:8). The Lord Jesus rebuked the hypocrite Scribes and Pharisees by these words. They clarify an important rule in prayer; what is important is not the prayer of the lips, but the words of the lips which are controlled and followed by the mind and heart. When you pray try to follow with your mind every word which comes out of your tongue.

St. John Al-Tabaisy says "If you say the written words of prayer, do not only care for saying the words but also let yourself be the words you say, because without that saying the words does not profit. Rather let the word be shaped in you and becomes genuine and you will appear in the world that you are a man of God".

He also says **"Do not think dear brother that prayer is just words, or prayer is learned by saying the words. Hear from me the truth: the spiritual prayer is not formed from mere words and sayings, because you do not pray to a man to whom you repeat complex words, but to the Spirit of God. So pray to Him with spirit"**.

Hence both the mind and heart should join the tongue in prayer. The mind understands what is said, the heart feels with what the mind thinks of and the lips speak with the words of spirit and understanding. It often happens that the tongue says the holy words of prayer while the heart wonders in other things, or that the mind understands the words of prayer while the heart does not feel them nor their meanings. True prayer has the thoughts of prayer combined with the feelings of

the heart.

Related to the subject of controlling the thought during prayer not being occupied in any other matter during prayer. When the Lord Jesus said "When you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father ... " (Matthew 6:6), He means not to occupy yourself by anything in prayer. The room of the spirit is the body and its doors are the body five senses. It is known that the senses are the intakes of knowledge, and is supposed that we close these intakes so that nothing enters from them which disperses our thoughts during prayer. **St. Oughrees says** "Forget about the necessities of the body when you stand to pray. If a flea, mosquito, a fly or an insect bit you, do not bother with it in order not to lose your award in prayer".

The two saints Nelles of Sinai and Oughrees report a vivid story about not being occupied at the time of prayer. Once a brother was waking praying in the desert when two angels appeared to him and walked with him, one on each side. He did not try to give them any attention in the least, so that he would not lose the fruit of prayer which is better than anything else. He used to remember the words of the Apostle "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?" (Romans 8:35).

The stories about the desert fathers are full of colorful pictures of heroism and toil in prayer. They did not stop the prayer nor were carried away from it in spite of the fact that the devil used to appear to them in the form of wild animals and wild reptiles!!

As we talk about controlling the thought during prayer, we should talk about the opposite side, meaning the wandering of the thought.

(4) WANDERING OF THOUGHTS DURING PRAYER:

This is the expression used by the saintly fathers by which they meant distraction of the thought during prayer. It is accepted that a person can rarely keep his full attention in a certain subject for a long time, whether in reading, studying, discussion or prayer. Few fathers, after long toil were able to overcome this side and walk in the economy of "**Crucifying the mind**"!! That is because of the inability of the mind at the beginning, by its nature, to concentrate on one subject for a long time.

We do not forget to state that it is common for a person attached to certain desires to have a stray mind. Also he who weighs his stomach with plenty of food, his mind may not be able in this state to control and direct his thoughts. The Lord Jesus pointed out to this by saying "But take heed to yourselves, **lest your hearts be weighed down** with carousing, drunkenness, and

cares of this life" (Luke 21:34). **St. Isaac said "Let not your stomach be weighed down lest your mind will be wandering,** and you will be totally distracted when you stand to pray. Your joints will relax and you will be full of laziness and slackness. Not only that, but also your soul will darken and your movements will be mixed up and you will not be able to gather the words because of the darkness. You will have bad taste in everything and will not enjoy the words of the psalms".

It is thus impossible for our thoughts as beginners, in the life of the spirit, not to wander. Yet the saints separate between two kinds of wandering: wandering of the thought to matters not suitable in prayer and wandering in matters which are beyond this world. The thought may try to ignore what comes to it, and this is not in its nature. Again there are good and bad wandering. If you do not pray unless the thought ascends above this world, and only pray when you see what is above, then you will never pray. If the thought ignores every kind of wandering in the matters above this world, one is not in need to pray, as the mind is in a perfect state and is in union with God and God is in it!!

If wandering of the thought - as pictured above - cannot be prevented, God is not offended if it occurs. He is offended if we submit to it and do not resist it. St. Isaac says "We are not condemned because of thoughts and shapes moving in us, but we find grace if we do not concede to them and resist them. We are condemned if we go along with them and give them place in us".

Accordingly, pure prayer is not the one which lacks wandering of the thought, but is the one in which the thought does not wander in vain matters. St. Isaac says "Pure prayer without wandering, is not the one in which mind is completely without thought or vision in any thing, but in which there is no wandering in vain matters during the prayer. If one wanders in the meaning of righteousness and in good matters, he does not deviate from the purity of prayer, but cares of necessary matters suitable of a conscience which pleases God in prayer".

He also says "Bad wandering is to wander in vain thoughts, wrong meditation, or unsuitable reflections during prayer in front of God. During prayer, good wandering occurs when the conscience reflects on the glory and greatness of God. That is remembering the books and understanding the divine words and holy sayings which are of the Spirit. It is not proper to consider this wandering as strange to the purity of prayer and as nullifying to the control of the mind".

St. Isaac goes further than that by saying "It is very good to control the mind. Yet if the mind frees itself and projects on divine matters or on something noble in explaining the books about God, this wandering is better than pure prayer. It is the limit in controlling the mind and good prayer. But if the conscience is totally clear from all concerns, it is hushing of the thought and not pure prayer".

Some are uneasy about the state of wandering during prayer and feel that it offends God. As a result, they gradually stop praying until - as they say - this war ends. The first remedy to wandering in prayer is prayer itself, meditation, spiritual readings, being by one's self, lack of care about earthly matters, toil, fear of God and escaping from the wandering itself and lack of concern about it. St. Isaac mentioned the following in this respect:

+ If you do not desire to pray until you get rid of wandering in prayer, realise that frequent prayer and much toil eliminate the wandering and it will disappear from the heart. **Getting rid of wandering of thoughts is achieved by prayer.** We never hear that anybody achieves that without continuing to pray. One cannot ask for perfection without toiling for perfection".

+ "There is no better means for arresting the mind from the world and delivering it from sin than meditating in God".

+ **"At the time when your thought is wandering, adhere to reading more than praying.** Yet not every book is useful".

+ "Prayer improves when it is mixed with continuous reading with understanding. This delivers us to meditation of the mind. Spiritual meditation of the mind creates in us concentration of the thought, and concentration of the thought eliminates wandering, and the disappearance of wandering creates in us inner prayer with understanding".

+ "This is the meaning of what is written that the soul benefits from the reading if it is represented in prayer and also gets enlightened in prayer from reading. I mean, instead of outside wandering, the soul finds material for changing the kinds of prayers and for real understanding by the thoughts remembering the marvels from the readings".

+ "The vision of a person is not clear when he stands beside smoke, unless he leaves that place. Likewise we cannot acquire purity of heart and stillness of the thought without being alone far from the smoke of this world which veils the eyes of the soul".

+ **"If you wish to get rid of wandering of the thought and find space for prayer by your mind, avoid caring for material things and the stray of senses"**.

+ "If you do not tire your body as much as you can and care for yourself always in everything, in every subject, you will not be granted the prayer without wandering".

+ **"Where there is fear of God, there is pure prayer without wandering"**.

+ "It is not expected that one has no wandering of thought during prayer, but that he should not go along with it and should resist it".

One more point which St. Isaac mentioned as a remedy of wandering of thought. It is hymns, particularly sad hymns.

(5) HEAT OF PRAYER:

Thus if we adhere in our striving to control the thought and resist its wandering during prayer - which results from the desires of the soul - we arrive to the pure prayer of the heart without wandering. **This kind of prayer creates in the heart a state of spiritual warmth**, about which David the Prophet sang in his psalm "My heart was hot within me; while I was musing, the fire burned. Then I spoke with my tongue" (Psalm 39:3).

This is the fire which our Lord Jesus Christ came to kindle on the earth of our hearts where the tares of desires grew previously and now by the grace give spiritual fruits as our Saviour said "I came to send fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!" (Luke 12:49). This is the fire which kindled the hearts of the Disciples of Emmaus, Cleopas and his companion and made them cry joyfully and say to one another "Did not our heart burn within us while He talked with us on the road, and while He opened the Scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:32).

St. Isaac says "Strong work creates in the heart an immeasurable amount of heat, gets enforced by the inflamed thoughts which ascend back to the mind. This work, guarded by the thought purify the mind by their heat, and grant it vision. This heat which is given by the grace of meditation creates tears, and continuous tears calm down the thought and purify the mind. Again, man with the pure thought sees the Divine mysteries. After that the mind arrives to seeing revelations and signs".

(6) TALKING PRAYER:

Let your prayer be a normal talk with God without formalities, a talk of a son with to his Heavenly Father, or a talk of a lover to his beloved, even to his worshipped!! St. Augustine says "In the beginning of our prayer we say "Our Father Who art in heaven ...", and by this call, love moves in our hearts - as there is no dearer to the father than the sons - and in us also moves a begging inclination, a trust from our behalf to receive what we shall ask for, since we

already - before we asked for anything - received such a great gift; it is granted to us to call God our Father. What is it which He will not give to His children when they ask, since He already granted them the grace of sonship!!".

Do not think that prayer is collection of sayings lined one after the other, or a collection of recited verses, added to them some well selected words. This is not the case, but real prayer is a simple talk. Do not be obliged to use the classical language in your prayer, else the word ties the meaning and prevents you from a nice talk with Whom your soul loves... God understands all languages and dialects.

In short, do not be formal in your prayer to God. Take off the robe of formalities, since our relation with God is the relation of sons not slaves, for God did not give us the spirit of bondage again to fear, but the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, "Abba, Father" (Romans 8:15). You will be alone with Him. Free yourself from the ties of the society. Talk to Him about your troubles, your pains, your love and your desires.

Tell Him "Lord, I am defeated in such and such matters, and I wish to live for you in purity and righteousness. Support me and help me ...". **Enter with God in a talk of familiarity and dialogue**, such as David used to do "If You, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?" (Psalm 130:3). Remind Him of His mercies with your fathers and His kindness to them from generation to generation, "But there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared" (Psalm 130:4) and ask Him to deal with you in the same way. He is yesterday, today and for ever...

We advice you to use the singular expression in your prayer. Do not say "We are sinners and we often offended, angered You and broke Your commands ...". Rather say "I am a sinner and often offended and angered You my Lord and broke Your command ...". Do not tell Him "The world and the desire battle us strongly and often defeat us ...". Rather say "The world and the desire fight me fiercely my Lord and often overcome me ...". **As such, the singular expressions put you face to face in front of God, and you feel the actual talk with Him ...**

We find that clear in the Liturgy of St. Gregory, which is a collection of wonderful meditations. In spite of the fact that it is used in the church and is prayed for all people, yet, its author, St. Gregory the Theologian, preferred it to be a marvellous meditating talk with the Son of God the Word.

He says for example "As a lover of Mankind **You have created me** a man, for You have no need of my servitude **rather I have need** of Your Lordship. According to the multitude of Your tender mercies, **You have brought me into being where I was not. For my sake** You have shut up the sea. **For my sake** You have manifested the nature of animals. You have put all things **under**

my feet. You wrought me in the image of Your Dominion. **And granted me** the gift of speech; and **opened to me** the Paradise **to enjoy. And gave me** the learning of Your knowledge ... You have O My Master **turned my punishment** into salvation ... You are Who **has sent me** the prophets for **my sake; I who am sick. You gave me** the Law for help. You are He who has **ministered salvation to me when I** disobeyed Your Law ...".

How remarkable are these expressions. They make man sail with his spirit in divinities and desire the heavenly.

(7) ELEMENTS OF PRAYER:

Prayers to God do not consist of petitions only, else our relationship with Him would be to benefit from Him only. Yet not all petitions are for our benefit, **as there are petitions for the sake of others** presented with love and service. The petition for others could be for spiritual reasons for saving their souls, or for the welfare of their physical life, such as to heal their illnesses or ease their difficulties. **There are other elements which we should include in prayer,** which we gather from the words of the Apostle "Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made **for all men ...**" (1 Timothy 2:1). **Each of St. Basil the Great and the Scholar Origen cite four elements which we should observe in our prayers:**

- **First we should glorify God by all our power and capability.** We see an example of that in psalms 103 and 104.

- **Then we thank Him for His benefits to all men in general and to us in particular.** See the thanksgivings of David in (2 Samuel, Chapter 22).

- **Then follows the confession of ons's sins and transgressions, and one's petition to God to forgive his past sins** and heal him from all spiritual illnesses which overcome him.

- Finally one enumerates all the spiritual, psychological and physical needs, for himself and **for all.**

- **The prayer ends by glorifying God.**

H) SOME PROBLEMS WITH PRAYER

(1) LUKEWARMNESS OF PRAYER

It indicates the state in which a person has no desire to pray as a result of not getting comforts in it. If he prays, he becomes anxious and wants to finish his prayer by any means, and as quickly as he can. In this state he feels that his prayer does not proceed beyond his lips!! This state is call by some "**Dryness in prayer**".

The cause is either from the self or from the devil. The former cause could be related to certain desires, or from certain psychological or physical states such as fatigue, poor health or lack of physical activities which result in dullness of the mind. Obviously, this soul does not find comfort in prayer. **The second cause are** the attacks which the devil wages, such as boredom,

restlessness and wandering of the thought which impede the comforts in prayer. Though, sometimes, God stops His comforts from coming to us for some wisdom He sees for our good and our spiritual benefit, or to test our love and faithfulness to him.

Concerning the first cause (our selves): If lukewarm prayer results from special desires in the heart, one cures that by penitence and purifying the heart. We came across this point when we spoke about the conditions of accepted prayers. We mentioned that prayer has to come out from a pure heart. Yet, if the cause is physical exhaustion, one should select the times when the body is sufficiently rested and has energy. For this, first hours of the day are most suited for prayer. There is a common error done by many; they pray evening prayer after they are very tired. Such persons could not feel the comforts of prayer.

Concerning the second cause (attacks of the devil): We overcome them by toil, perseverance and remedies for wandering of the thoughts, which we dealt with previously. We realise that comfort in prayer is a gift from God to encourage the beginners in their spiritual striving. But we cannot always use these comforts as motivation in our spiritual striving. A soldier who is going to war, is paraded by musical bands which create in him enthusiasm for the battle. This state does not continue on the battle ground. The initial charge of enthusiasm ceases and the quality of the soldier is tested on the battle ground. The saintly fathers were exposed to this state in all its forms and thus every one who toils in his spiritual striving suffers from it.

Many go through a mood of questioning when they suffer from a state of spiritual dryness. As they search themselves concerning sins, they find that they are careful and continuing steadfastly on their spiritual practices. Still, the state of dryness persists, and the devil comes and tries to confuse them that they are total failure in their spiritual lives and God has entirely rejected them. Hence there is no spiritual joy or comfort in their heart!! Yet this might be according to some Divine economy and wisdom, so that to either double our striving or not to become haughty due to much comfort in prayers. This is what happened to St. Paul as he was given a thorn in the flesh lest he should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations. A thorn in the flesh was given to him, a messenger of Satan to buffet him, lest he be exalted above measure (2 Corinthians 12:7).

A most needed treatment to the state of lukewarmness or boredom in prayer, is the grace of abiding in God. He seems very far from us when we pray; the heart is hard like dust and the words of prayer appear not to travel beyond our lips. This state is described by some as the Divine Revelation says "And your heavens which are over your head shall be bronze, and the earth which is under you shall be iron" (Deuteronomy 28:23). **The treatment is summarised in the persistence of the will by not submitting even for a second to the pressures of the dryness and the lukewarmness. Let us advance courageously towards God, even when we do not see Him.**

Moreover, our relationship with God should not depend on feelings. The comforts which arrive to us in prayers are like smiles of approval from another person. He who needs these smiles is the slave who waits for the approval of his master. But we are sons. This does not mean that if God does not smile to our faces one day, that we have lost our sonship to Him!! **We have to separate between the feelings of the slaves and those of the sons.**

God Himself - as we mentioned earlier - permits in many cases to deny us the comforts in prayer for many reasons. That is for our teaching and discipline. We may imagine - if we always have comforts in prayer - that we became saints and become conceited. This means that God gave us a grace not a curse. When God gives a grace, He always gives with it the means to reserve it. **Denying us the comforts does not mean that God is angry with us.** A mother who teaches her infant walking, does not hold his hand every time he walks step by step, but sometimes leaves his hand. He feels scared, cries and holds her hand. **Similarly, the grace of God lets us feel that it is with us. It leaves us for some instants so that we feel the need of it, rush towards God and fall into His bosom.**

There is no indication that our prayer - when we suffer from such spiritual dryness - is rejected from God. On the contrary, God may accept it with a better degree than the prayers in which we feel comforted. The reason is that the latter are concluded in comfort, but the former are performed with toil, labour and difficulty. **The value of prayer is not measured by the degree of comfort but by the amount of toil.**

It seems that not a single soul who seeks God and walks behind Him in his ways, does not encounter this difficulty. Perhaps the Prophet David describes this state in its worst form in Psalm 23: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me; your rod and Your staff, they comfort me" (Psalm 23:4), and in Psalm 63 he says "O God, You are my God; early will I seek You; my soul thirsts for You; my flesh longs for You in a dry and thirsty land where there is no water. **So I have looked for You in the sanctuary, to see Your power and Your glory**" (Psalm 63:1, 2). That is, in the dry and thirsty land he has looked for Him in the sanctuary. While in the midst of this pain, he is seeking comfort or even just a feeling of approval.

But with a crushed heart David was satisfied with waiting upon God, and what all God allots. Why? Because he was repeating "O God, You are my God" (Psalm 63:1). Then comes after that the shout of victory "My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness, and my mouth shall praise You with joyful lips" (Psalm 63:5). This joy does not originate from inner comfort he received, but from God Himself, Whom David was sure of His presence and love, whether that was in the darkness or in the light.

Other psalms expressed the suffering from spiritual dryness. Among them are psalms 10, 13, 22, 88, 102, 130, 140, ... In psalm 13 for example, David says "How long, O Lord? Will You forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me?" (Psalm 13:1) and in its end he says "But I have trusted in Your mercy; my heart shall rejoice in Your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, because He has dealt bountifully with me" (Psalm 13:5, 6). In the beginning of psalm 22, David says "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me? Why are You so far from helping Me, and from the words of My groaning? O My God, I cry in the daytime, but You do not hear; and in the night season, and am not silent" (Psalm 22:1, 2). Near its end he says "I will declare Your name to My brethren; in the midst of the assembly I will praise You. You who fear the Lord, praise Him! All you descendants of Jacob, glorify Him, and fear Him, all you offspring of Israel! For He has not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; nor has He hidden His face from Him; but when He cried to Him, He heard" (Psalm 22:22-24).

Mistaken is he who expects continuous joy in his prayer, and is saddened and depressed when he loses and does not find it. Our aim in our spiritual life is not the joy but God Himself. Joy is an accidental event and it is not correct to deviate from the principle to the accidental. **We should come to the spiritual dryness and carry it as a cross for Christ.** We should always ask ourselves, carefully and honestly "What is the aim and the subject of our spiritual striving, is it to receive comfort and joy, or to be close with God?".

(2) THE PROBLEM OF TIME:

The factor of time started to appear as a problem for prayer in our present era, as many people are busy in their work and with numerous responsibilities. We wish to divide business into two kinds: The necessary business which is out of one's hand and the many other business which a person carries out by his own will. There is no excuse for a person to neglect his religious duties because of the latter.

Actually, the problem requires the person to organise his time in order to coordinate between one's duties towards God and the rest of his duties. For this, a person should avoid times wasted in meetings, vain discussions and useless business. One should also regard prayer as an important matter, for which he reserves time. He should not leave it to the end of his work, and prays if he finds time for prayer and if he does not find time he excuses himself that he is busy.

When the Church assigned the law of the seven prayers "Prayers of the Agbia", she did not do that for the monks only, but for all believers. The role of the monks is for continuous prayer. The seven daily prayers were mentioned among the laws of the Ecumenical Council of

Nicea in the year 325 A.D. Yet these laws go back to the time of the Disciples and were reported among their canons. They were also among the laws of Hippolytus in the beginning of the third century.

We are asked, as much as we can - without favouring ourselves - to say these prayers, and benefit from their blessings and their work in our lives. Yet if we cannot fulfil all of them, let us fulfil what we can according to the economy of God for our time. **We will be blamed in front of our conscience if we favour a secondary free-will business to prayer, which is essential to our spiritual lives and our relations to God and to people.**

We realise that some people have obligatory responsibilities which fill their times. Yet they try with good intention and with all their longing to put aside longer times for prayer, but cannot achieve the desire of their hearts towards God. **Those people are not condemned since God is well aware of their circumstances and possibilities. The desire of their hearts towards God is by itself pure and acceptable prayer in front of God, without them raising their eyes and hands upwards, and without uttering the words of prayer.**

There are other people who neglect their prayers, and lack of time is their excuse. In fact it is due to not preparing particular times for prayer, that they find it difficult to pray, or they imagine that prayer with the psalms is only for the monks and the clergy.

As a treatment to all that, we say, that one should convince himself well about the importance of prayer for his life, and to make an effort to save time for it. One should set a short program if his time is not sufficient for the whole prayers. However, the majority of people, no matter how busy they are, have plenty of time for prayer in the early morning and in the evening.

Hence people are to be blamed for neglecting morning prayers. In particular because this prayer carries a spiritual program for a good plan for the believer to follow concerning his duties towards God and his dealings with people. **He who starts his day with God can complete the day well with the help of the Grace.**

Similar blessings are reserved for the evening prayers, which we advise not to be immediately before sleeping, when one is tired and drowsy. The most suitable time for evening prayer is before supper or before going out in the evening. Yet if it should be immediately before sleeping, one may pray any special prayer from his heart and deliver himself in the hands of God, ask for His blessings and guard in this night. He then sleeps leaning on the bosom of Jesus, the Lover Who comforts all the tired people.

Again if one is not tired before sleeping, and is able to pray more than that, he may recite the absolution of the sunset hour or that of the compline or both, together with other prayers which he learned by heart.

However, during the day, we advice that one lifts up his heart towards God by any means. **Memorising is a very useful factor. He who memorises a good number of psalms, parts of the "Agbia", its absolutions and prayers, can say from his memory what suits the daily hours and its holy occasions from his memory.** He does that without any body posture constraints. He may pray in the road, in the place of work or in the means of communications, whether he is sitting, standing or walking. **We cite some example:**

Someone to whom God gave some spare time at noon and he was able to say the complete "Sext prayer", should thank God from his heart for this co-ordination and should complete his prayer by the help of God. If he does not find time, except few minutes, and he says the absolution of the prayer or its parts, that is enough. If he does not find even few minutes, let him say one out of the six parts of this prayer "O thou who on the sixth day at the sixth hour ...", for example. What is important is that he did not let this holy chance to go without praying and receiving its blessings. If he does not find even one minute, except few seconds, let him say "Take away the handwriting of our sins O Christ, as You did on the Cross on the sixth hour". Can we say about this person that he did not remember the Lord in the sixth hour? No, but he remembered Him according to his ability. We say the same about prayers of the other hours.

However, we here caution the person who has sufficient time and is careless by shortening and simplifying the prayer as we have outlined, while he has enough time for its completion.

(3) THE PROBLEM OF SPACE:

Because of the increase in the number of people on the small inhabited area of land, living areas are both small and expensive. Hence families live in crowded flats and as a result, small space created a problem for prayer.

Private prayer should be said by the person as he is by himself, and it is rare to keep a special place for prayer in the flat. The room in which one prays may be shared by other members of his family. Such members may not be religious and do not welcome prayers. They may even behave in a sarcastic way about prayer, particularly when the praying person is a youth or a young man. The room may be shared by everybody, and the problem becomes more complex if the whole

family is not religious.

We admit that a person who is not praying does not give a praying person sufficient liberty, and does not help him to be candid in his prayer. In any case, it is a problem to be overcome. One should be firm in his ways and in his prayers. This firmness may be the best rebuke to those who do not pray, and a means for winning them to Christ. I know a pious young man in one of the military colleges who used to stand beside his bed in the sleeping hall and pray the prayers of the psalms without being embarrassed. When the authorities knew about him, they respected and valued him more.

To solve this problem, some people wake up early before those who share the room with them, and also wait at night until all are asleep. Then they stand for prayer. **It is a problem, and it is a struggle which has its crown and its blessings.**

There is another point we wish to mention concerning the space for prayer. Rarely, a family keeps a place for prayer in the home "Prayer corner". We wish that every Christian family cares and keeps any place in the home and beautifies it with religious pictures. Even more if the family may put a light in front of the picture of one or more saints. Beside the special blessing of this matter, it creates an atmosphere of worship and prayer in the house. Let our care for this corner be more than our care for any other area of the house, as being the place where we meet the Lord and in which we throw away all our loads and troubles and find help and power.

(4) THE PROBLEM OF SHYNESS:

Shyness may form a problem for some people, not only in public prayers but also in their private prayers. They are very embarrassed not only from praying in front of others or in their presence, but also from just knowing that others - who share the dwelling with them - know that they pray, even members of the same family!! This mere knowledge is a cause of unease and discomfort for them. This problem follows them in the private and general prayer meetings. For such a person who suffers from this shyness, he should gradually train himself not to be shy, by focusing his energy towards God and not the people. Let him have a special petition in his prayer for this problem of shyness.

(5) THE SUBJECT OF PRAYING IN SECRET:

Prayer in secret is a command from the Lord Jesus to all believers (Matthew 6:6). But some

people understand this command in a crooked way far away from its meaning. **When the Lord Jesus commanded us to pray in secret, He did not mean that nobody sees us or that nobody at all knows that we pray. But He meant elimination of hypocrisy, love of appearance and asking glory from the people.** These diseases filled the society at that time, and the Lord Jesus - not only concerning prayer - commanded us in all we do, we do from the heart to Him and He alone will reward each person according to his deeds. If Christ has meant that nobody at all should see us (praying), how can we explain His saying "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16)?!

The devil attacks some people as he hides behind this command, so that they do not enter one of the rooms in the home and close the door, else others know that they went to pray. In the evening when they want to pray the psalm prayer - they do not want to put the light on, else others outside the room know that they are praying. If someone enters the room while they are praying, they change the position of praying so that this person does not know that they are praying. The source of all that is their misunderstanding of the command about praying in secret. The Lord Jesus, by this command, means that our prayers should not be for the purpose of hypocrisy, appearance and asking the glory of people, if someone sees us praying. The Lord Jesus rewards us according to the feeling of our hearts.

(6) FAMILY OBSTRUCTIONS:

This point refer more to the youth and young people who come from secular families. The families may give them hard time from sarcasm about their piety and prayers trying to convince them that they are treading the wrong road, to preventing them from going to spiritual and prayer meetings. The families may even interfere by force in their personal freedom and stop them from praying using their authority, or not consider their feelings trying to annoy them by the loud voice of the radio or TV, if they realise that they are praying.

In our view, that standing steadfastly of the youth against such current and annoyances, going to God, behaving wisely and prudently, are sufficient to make them victorious against such annoyances. But this may lead them to win those resisting people by the power of prayer which cannot be defeated "It is hard for you to kick against the goads" (Acts 9:5)!!

I) THE CEASELESS PRAYER

Not only those who live the life of quietness in the deserts and the wilderness are qualified for high levels of prayer, but even those who are living among the different endeavours of life, if they make use of every opportunity they encounter. The Lord Jesus teaches us that "men always ought to pray and not lose heart" (Luke 18:1) and the Apostle commands the believers saying "Pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). **David the great, a**

king of Israel, very busy with his kingdom, used to say "I have set the Lord always before me" (Psalm 16:8). "Seven times a day I praise You, because of Your righteous judgments" (Psalm 119:164). "At midnight I will rise to give thanks to You, because of Your righteous judgments" (Psalm 119:62).

What is the meaning of the above verses? Does it mean that one stops working completely in order to fulfil the command "Pray without ceasing"? Of course not. Is it possible to combine work and prayer, though it is known that the mind cannot concentrate on two matters at the same time?! Was the last command written for a particular group of Christians such as for example the monks who are dedicated to worship, or was it to all the people? It is clear that the Apostle was commanding all the believers. Some say that to pray without ceasing which the Apostle commanded is a symbolic and not a literal command.

The ceaseless prayer does not comprise the continuous work of the mind. It does not require the outside attributes of prayer, but normally the ceaseless hidden prayer. In order to realise this we have to understand the meaning of the word "normal". It indicates an inclination or a secured preparation, which drives the person to automatically, easily and with increasing cleverness to perform what he normally does, until work - after a while - is practically related to the will. In other words, when we say, we acquire a certain habit, we mean that our mental, literal, and spiritual powers are arranged in a certain way, and ready by a special force, trained and prepared, so that under certain circumstances, continuously and regularly do consistent work.

There is another factor; the state of ceaseless prayer results from love. For example, we say that the husband loves his wife and children and thinks about them always. This does not mean that he is not engaged with their love when his mind is totally occupied in his work. **According to this measure, the ceaseless prayer is to live the life of love with God.** The love which lifts up the heart to Him always.

The duties which hold us from thinking directly about God - if presented as services for our love - are by themselves considered work of prayer. Prayer does not constitute thoughts and words but works also. **St. Clement of Alexandria says in his book "Varieties" about the true Christian "He prays everywhere, walking, talking and reading. All mental works are considered different works of prayer".**

FEELING THE PRESENCE OF GOD:

The more I talk with God, the more I converse with Him, and the more I continually

feel His real presence with me. When we return from saying farewell to a person who passed away, who used to live with us in the same house, we say and feel that this house is empty without this person. We used to always feel the presence of this person with us. The continuous communication with him created this feeling in us.

The feeling of the presence of God resembles - to a certain extent - the feeling of the presence of a dear friend. The loving dealing with him and talking to him, gain a constant feeling of the presence of this beloved person, whom we now miss after his departure. Let us direct ourselves to God with the same effort we spend in our relations with people, **knowing that wherever love is, no effort is required!!** The point is that our relation with a friend concerns the sight, while in the case of God it concerns faith.

Someone says "God is present everywhere". That is true, but for us there is one place in the whole universe where we contact God - in the depth of our hearts "You are the temple of God" (1 Corinthians 3:16). There He waits for us, there He meets us and there He talks to us. In order to find Him and meet Him we need to enter inside ourselves. Thus if we want to feel the presence of God, we have to look for Him inside, not outside. We should not leave our thoughts to search for Him here and there outside us. Even if He were there, we do not contact Him in that place but inside ourselves only. This was the misconception of St. Augustine before his repentance, as he was searching for God until he found Him after he wasted a long valuable time. He says in the tenth book of his confession **"I loved you very late, O very old beauty, yet very new"**. Then he cries **"I loved You very late!! You were inside and I was outside, and I was searching for You in a different way"**.

SHORT REPETITIVE PRAYERS:

As a result of the love of God which overwhelms the soul, and its feelings of His presence inside her, the spirit sails expressing her love, happiness and her needs by saying short repetitive prayers which do not need rational concentration or mental effort. These prayers do not require a specific time, place or atmosphere, as they are the words of man to the Holy Spirit dwelling inside him.

We can express our feelings by these short prayers in crowded roads, in the tramway, in the bus, when we are alone, or in a gathering and in general in all circumstances and conditions. **How beautiful are the words contained in the Saturday (Ebsolmody) prayers in the Church annual praises "Every breath of mine praises Your Holy Name"**. It is true O Lord that every breath praises You. Every breath coming from inside me brings out with it praises to You my beloved. It carries the feelings of my love, loyalty, submission and the desire of myself to be always with You.

We ask you dear brother to practice this beautiful wonderful exercise. It is not mere theoretical talk, but actual experience by many who live in it. There is nothing which prevents you from practising and enjoying it. It needs the feeling and awareness of the presence of the Beloved within you. The moment you are aware of His presence you will shout with the groom "I found the one I love. I held him and would not let him go" (Song 3:4). This exercise - like any other one - its perfection requires practice and patience. In the beginning, it needs some effort and perseverance, but keeping at it with patience carries us to the state when we do it without toil or effort.

EXAMPLES:

(1) Prayer of My Lord Jesus Christ: The believer repeats the beautiful name of Christ accompanied with a short petition as he says for example "Lord Jesus Christ Son of God have mercy on me ... My Lord Jesus Christ help me ... My Lord Jesus Christ cast away this evil thought from me ... My Lord Jesus Christ give me quietness in my body ... My Lord Jesus Christ evict all evil power away from me ... My Lord Jesus Christ grant me to love you ... My Lord Jesus Christ ... and so on ...".

This prayer was used since the early centuries of Christianity. It is mentioned in the writings of Saints Aphraam, John Chrysostom, Isaac, Barsonophes and John El-Dargy.

It is a petition which needs no effort nor control of thought, but requires love and determination. It is a short prayer, yet it keeps for the heart its devout heat and it is a ceaseless tongue which converses with the creator.

The name of the Lord has great power and might and is a haven to all who come to Him. "The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe" (Proverbs 18:10). The name of the Lord terrifies the devils. "But Paul, greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I command you **in the name of Jesus Christ** to come out of her" And he came out that very hour" (Acts 16:18).

If you were bothered by thoughts or devilish attacks, or because of any other difficulties, or if you were captive of evil habits, we advice you to experience the power and might of this prayer.

(2) Repeating the first verse of psalm 70 "Make haste, O God, to deliver me! Make haste to help me, O Lord!" (Psalm 70:1). John Cassian mentioned that all ascetic people in Egypt used to say this prayer. He also adds his experiences about this prayer and this nice exercise. **He**

says in his book "The meetings":

"This part was not chosen haphazardly from among the Holy Books. It includes all human feelings, which may be expressed in all cases, because it is the calling of God against every danger, and contains a modest pious confession, with continuous fear as man remembers his weakness and his trust in the answer and assurance of help. The person who keeps calling Him Who defends him, is surely in His hand always. This phrase is a safe wall for all who are under the devils' attacks, beside being an undefeated cover and a strong shield.

This phrase is a help and is useful for each one of us in all the circumstances which we encounter. We ought to recite it ceaselessly until we learn it. May you always remember it. Whatever you are doing on the journey you are making, do not stop chanting it. When you go to bed, or when you are eating, and in general, think of it and say it repeatedly in every occasion. This thought is not only saving and keeping you from the devils' attacks, but it also purifies you from all earthly errs and mistakes, and this hidden heavenly meditation leads you to unexpressed prayer heat. **Let sleep creep on you while you are citing it. Let it be the first thing you think of when you wake up. When you get up, kneel down on your knees and repeat it. Let it follow you all day long".**

J) PRAYER ACCORDING TO RULES

Is it more suitable and agreeable for prayer to have a rule, regulation or a canon in

our worship?

The objection is known, that the read prayer becomes routine, while it should be free coming from inside. It is wrong to ignore such considerations when it happens that we say the written prayer by the tongue, without the thought and heart sharing it. **On the other hand**, if we do not have a certain discipline or a special rule in our prayers, and that we pray only when we have the desire, we are in danger of securing a loss equal to the previous one. We will then grow up with no desire to pray, as the phenomena of discontinuity will mostly lead to complete negligence.

(1) Having rules for prayer does not offend God

Two matters interest God most: to have our wills move towards Him and to have a goal for what we do. **Having a definite rule for prayer is by itself a determination to pray and to talk to God regularly regardless of the states of our feelings.** The rule for prayer is like a covenant for man to keep praying, and to be faithful till death. It is obvious that tying ourselves with such rule is a kind of work of the will which has long effect. This is better than leaving ourselves to pray only when we encounter an accidental feeling. However strong this feeling is at that time, it will weaken and vanish after a while with no purpose or goal.

(2) Following rules of prayer is a help to us

Most of us are in need of a kind of drive to pray, and this is realised by this discipline, as we meet obstacles and barriers to prayer such as states of spiritual dryness and the like. **We should not necessarily count such combats as resulting from prayer according to rules, as they may result from some inner spiritual weakness.**

Prayer is not only fellowship with God but also struggle against our spiritual foes. Following rules of prayer helps us to overcome such difficulties and obstacles which we meet.

Christianity is not a call to absolute liberty, getting rid of all ties and rejection of duties. Liberty in this understanding is not for the glory of the children of God which the Lord Jesus moved us to after we were burdened under the slavery of corruption. This looseness uses liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, which the Apostle warned us against (Galatians 5:13).

The saintly fathers were unanimous on the necessity of following a law for worship, laid down by the spiritual fathers. This matter is suitable for all, specially the beginners in

spiritual lives. **St. Eronimos** says in his message to a woman disciple called Yostichom "The Apostle commands us to pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17), and for the saints, sleeping is considered prayer. But we should designate times for prayer so that if we are busy doing anything, time itself reminds us of our duty ...". **There is nothing wrong in ceremonial worship, not in the least. What is wrong is to perform it in a mechanical way which diminishes its value and its effect.**

PRAYER OF THE PSALMS:

Why did the Church choose the psalms of the Prophet David and arrange them in a special book "The Agbia" for the believers to use in their personal, and also in public prayer?

I do not want to answer this question using my own words, **but I wish that you earnestly listen to the splendid words of St. John Chrysostom. He says:**

"We hardly read the books of the Old Testament once a year. The Holy Gospels which are for our Saviour with what they contain from teachings, and writings about miracles, we read in the church once or twice a week. The same is for the sayings of our teacher Paul. Yet concerning the book of blessed David, I do not know how did the Grace of the Holy Spirit arrange that we use it in prayer day and night. It is used by everyone like very expensive perfume. In the churches and in public meetings, David is at the start, the middle and the end. In the funerals for the dead and in the houses of virgins and those who work with their hands, David is the first, the last and in between.

Even those who cannot read, when they start learning, they begin with the sayings of David and learn them. In the houses of virgin who imitate Mary, or in the caves of pious men in the deserts who pray hard talking to God, David is in the start, the middle and the end. He who is sleeping deeply by his natural body, and wakes up not in the proper time, David receives him at once.

How many angelic praises raised for God by His worshippers. David makes heaven from earth, makes angels from the human, beautifies all our lives and prepares everything for us: raises up children by chastising them, calls the youth to understanding, offers chastity to virgins, grants protection to the elderly. He invites sinners to repentance by saying: confess to the Lord for He is good!

David encourages those who walk in the road of repentance by saying: "Do not remember the sins of my youth, nor my transgressions; O Lord" (Psalm 25:7). He lifts up those to whom God

is gracious and urges them saying: "What shall I render to the Lord for all His benefits toward me?" (Psalm 116:12). He calls those who sinned to confess many times saying: "Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Your loving kindness (Psalm 51:1). He affirms those who are called for priesthood by saying: "O Lord, do not hide Your face from me" (Psalm 143:7). He teaches those who are taken to court saying: "O God, deliver me from the deceitful and unjust man!" (Psalm 43:1). He calms those who fear the enemies saying: "Deliver me from my enemies, O my God" (Psalm 59:1). He encourages the patient and thankful to praise God by his saying: "I waited patiently for the Lord; and He inclined to me, and heard my cry" (Psalm 40:1).

How great and noble is this harp which gathers the voices of the world as its strings sound in their ears exaltation and praises to God".

(1) David accumulated in his personality marvellous experiences:

He was a shepherd, a great prophet and a king and was the saint who sailed in the sky of the spirit. He was also whom God permitted to fall into two horrible sins which humiliated him and for which he kept weeping and drenching his couch with his tears (Psalm 6:6) saying "My sin is always before me" (Psalm 51:3). Thus, in the psalms we find various experiences which certainly suit all our needs.

(2) The psalms came out from the heart of a man who was cleansed by repentance, and who toiled greatly for the life of the spirit. We ought to look at David in order not to feel haughty.

St. John Chrysostom says "Know your limits man. Did you achieve what David did? Hear him when he says "My knees are weak from fasting, and my flesh is feeble from lack of fatness" (Psalm 109:24) and "But as for me, when they were sick, my clothing was sackcloth; I humbled myself with fasting" (Psalm 35:13). He said about being watchful "At midnight I will rise to give thanks to You, because of Your righteous judgments" (Psalm 119:62), "Seven times a day I praise You, because of Your righteous judgments" (Psalm 119:164) and "I give myself to prayer" (Psalm 109:4). About piety he said "For I have eaten ashes like bread, and mingled my drink with weeping" (Psalm 102:9).

Why do we enumerate the merits of David when God gave testimony and said about him, "I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after My own heart" (Acts 13:22). In spite of all these supports he fell. Hence do not be lax dear brother because "If the righteous one is scarcely saved, where will the ungodly and the sinner appear?" (1 Peter 4:18). Hence be watchful.

(3) The psalms are referred to and were recited by the Prophet David. Nevertheless they are the words of God which David said by the Holy Spirit. The Lord Jesus said "For David himself said by the Holy Spirit ... " (Mark 12:36), and when you recite the psalms you talk to God by His words. Is there anything greater than that.

It is more assuring for a lawyer who is defending an accused person to speak to the judge by the terms of the law, rather than by the words of the accused. The judge is obliged to pass his sentence on the accused by the terms of the law. Is this not what we realise from the psalms of David which include portrays of the love of God, His mercies, graces, goodness, kindness, compassion, justice and fatherhood to mankind? All we hope is that God deals with us according to these attributes.

(4) Our free prayers are mostly petitions which consist of requests for our own benefit and they mostly lack an important element in prayer; the element of praise. This element is clearly present in the psalms.

(5) Above all, the psalms are amazing material for meditation. For those who recite the psalms by the Spirit and attentively, the psalms give them true and wonderful meditations. They could not have originated except from the Spirit of God. This was the experience of the fathers and is the same for us. What is the reason for that? It could be the multiplicity of thoughts, the profundity of feelings of their authors, the purity of hearts which presented them and the evident prophecies which they contain. All that and more could be the reason. In any case, I have told you a sure phenomena which you should experience.

After all that, do you ask for a proof about the power of the psalms and their great value in prayer? Listen to what St. Isaac says "You should have an endless desire to recite the psalms because they are the food of the spirit".

We do not mean from what we said that you pray by only reciting the psalms. Following each prayer by the psalms, you should continue by your personal prayer which expresses your feeling towards God and asks for your personal petitions. **The saintly fathers consider reciting the psalms as an introduction to the prayer by the heart.**

HOW DO WE RECITE THE PSALMS?

+ **Present your prayer with awe and reverence.** Lift up your hands towards heaven in humility and bow down respectfully. St. Isaac says "The more you care for that, the more is the visitation of the Grace, as it is great in the eyes of the Lord the reverence which man presents during the sacrifice of his prayer". Comprehend the meaning of the prayer and say the words of the psalms slowly and thoughtfully, as if they are yours and not others.

+ **If you do not have time to recite all the psalms of the hour, read what you can by the spirit what you can.** St. Isaac says "If you want to enjoy the sweetness of reciting the psalms and appreciate the taste of the Holy Spirit in them, disregard the quantity and do not care about the number of psalms you recite. It is sufficient that you understand the meaning of the prayer and the feeling of glorifying God will move inside you".

+ **For every time in the psalms, the word bowing down is mentioned, bow down, or in the least bow down your head slightly.** It would be better if you bow down after each psalm asking a petition from God. If you felt you offended God by a certain sin, bow down after the word "Alleluia" and say to the Lord "I sinned against you my Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me". If you were tormented from a certain sin, bow down also after each psalm and ask God to deliver you from it, and so on. If someone is in a particular difficulty and asks you to pray for him, you may pray for him in this way.

+ **John Cassian reports for us about the monks of Egypt at the end of the fourth century and says** "I saw them in their prayer, when they finish reciting each psalm they do not hurry in bowing down, as if it is a duty they wish to finish - as most of us now do - on the contrary, after each psalm, they wait for a while in which they raise up a short prayer. They bow down to the ground respectfully and with great piety. Then they gently stand up attentively with all their thoughts concentrated in prayer".

+ **The expression "Kirilayson" or "Lord have mercy" which we say as we recite the psalms, should be said slowly.** Every time you say "Lord have mercy", realise that a whip or a lash has fallen on the back of the Lord Jesus, and say inside yourself "This is for my sake". Take from the suffering of the Saviour a means to ask mercy for your miserable soul.

CHAPTER 2

FASTING

“Consecrate a fast, Call a sacred assembly”
(Joel 2:15)

- A) Spiritual Understanding of Fasting**
- B) Significance of Fasting for Spiritual Life**
- C) Why Do I Fast?**
- D) How Do I Fast?**
- E) Advice and Guidelines**
- F) Fasts of the Coptic Church**

A) SPIRITUAL UNDERSTANDING OF FASTING

Two concepts of fasting:

a) Fasting, in its special meaning is abstaining from food for a period of time, followed by eating food free from animal product.

b) Fasting, in its general meaning, involves all kinds of asceticism and overcoming the desires of the flesh.

St. John Tebaisy said, “Fasting for the body is to be hungry for food, but fasting for the soul is to be hungry and thirsty for righteousness and fasting from doing evil.” St. Paul said, “Everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become

disqualified.” (1 Corinthians 9:25-27) Let us first discuss the subject of fasting in its general meaning: subduing the body.

Subduing the body:

St. Paul the great missionary and evangelist, who ascended to the third heavens, saw unspeakable matters, and who labored more than any of the apostles, says, **“I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.”** (1 Corinthians 9:27) **Is it possible that such a great saint be disqualified? Is it possible that, after he had been worthy of seeing many visions, he could fall in the lust of the flesh and lose the reward in heaven?**

St. Paul’s words clarify an important aspect of the true Christian spiritual struggle; in order to guarantee our salvation, we have always to be on guard. Some people say, “We are saved”, meaning we are going to heaven. How can we be sure of that when we live in earthly bodies and need to struggle against the body? **St. Peter’s says, “If the righteous one is scarcely saved, Where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?”** (1 Peter 4:18)

Truly, what hinders the spiritual growth in virtues for anyone is the desires of the flesh. St. James says, “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) The spirit desires to be with God, but the body pulls it down and hinders its growth. **The flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things you wish**” (Galatians 5:17)

St. Paul defines the Christian as the one who subdues the body and its passions and desires. **“And those who are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires”** (Galatians 5:24) **Hence, subduing the body should have priority in our spiritual struggle for a perfect Christian life.** In order to mold iron, it is not enough to soften it with fire, but you have to hammer it into the shape you want. Similarly, it is not enough to soften our hearts with the flame of prayers, for example, but we have to hammer them with the hammer of asceticism and piety. “If you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live” (Romans 8:13)

If we want to follow Jesus, piety and asceticism are the cross, which we must always carry. “Always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body” (2 Corinthians 4:10)

David wrote, "For Your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter." (Psalms 44:22) Truly, we do not deserve the real joy of the Spirit unless we mortify all the lust of the body and any worldly desire inside us. Remember that Sarah bore a son of the spirit, "Isaac" though she was barren. Our Lord Jesus did not return from Egypt to his homeland until the death of Herod who was looking to kill Him. You also have to kill Herod, who is looking to destroy your soul, referring to subduing of the body, before the Lord can come into your heart.

Overcoming one's desires and lust in itself needs a great struggle. "He who rules his spirit is better than he that takes a city" (Proverbs 16:32) St. Ambrose said, "Our lusts are our greater enemies more than the outside ones. What Joseph did when he controlled himself against the temptations of his master's wife is greater than all that he did when he became the second man in Egypt." St. John Chrysostom said about David, "When David did not fight back his enemy, Saul, this was a greater accomplishment than his killing of Goliath the giant" Fasting is one of the important means of subduing the body and its desires.

What is fasting?

Fasting is deprivation from some food, gradually becoming voluntary abstinence from food. This is not to weaken the body, but to subdue it and to revive the spirit. It is not an obligation we are forced to do, but rather we need it because of our troublesome body. It is not a matter concerning the body, as much as it is concerning the spirit. Its purpose is not repentance for our sins, but preparing oneself to receive God, for there is no work that can forgive the sins except the redeeming work of the Lord Jesus.

B) SIGNIFICANCE OF FASTING FOR THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

In general, fasting has a special significance in the spiritual life. The practices and sayings of our fathers in both the Old and the New Testaments emphasize this. As well, our Lord Jesus honored it by practicing it and by His sayings. The opinion of some saints is that the struggle of fasting should precede all other struggles. If the body is not overcome and subdued, one finds his spirit hindered from being uplifted to God. Mar Isaac said, "**Every struggle against sin and its desires should start by fasting, especially if the struggle is against an inner sin.**"

Hence, all those who want to struggle have to start from the first step. Our Lord started His ministry from this point. When He was baptized, the Spirit led Him to the wilderness, and He fasted forty days and forty nights. **All those who want to follow His steps have to lay the foundation of their struggle according to what He had done.** Let us now discuss the significance of fasting.

First: in the Old Testament:

The sin of the first man was against fasting. God had commanded Adam not to eat from the fruit of a certain tree but he disobeyed and ate from it, and all mankind was punished.

St. John Chrysostom said, "When God created the first man, He told him to fast to control himself. As a loving father, God was concerned about Adam's salvation. He told him; "From all the fruits of the trees you can eat except the tree of the knowledge of evil

and good, you cannot eat from that.” Is not this a form of fasting? Since fasting in paradise was important, how much more would it be outside the paradise!”

If Adam had obeyed that voice of God, he would not have heard the second voice, “You are dust and you return to dust.” Adam’s punishment was death when he disobeyed God and neglected fasting. On the other hand, many of God’s people fasted and performed great works. Group fasting also gave wondrous results.

Moses, the prophet, after he had fasted forty days, became worthy to see God, talk to Him and to receive from Him the Ten Commandments written by God’s finger.

Elijah after he had fasted forty days, was honored to see God raise the dead and open the gates of heaven.

Esther, by fasting, was able to remove the punishment of death inflicted on her people.

Daniel was fasting when angel Gabriel appeared and revealed to him God’s secrets.

Judith fasted all her days after becoming a widow.

Nehemiah, when he heard the sorrowful news of his brothers in Jerusalem and how the walls of Jerusalem were destroyed and its doors burnt down with fire, fasted, wept and prayed to God. (Nehemiah 1:4)

Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, the prophetess, “was a widow of about eighty-four years who did not depart from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day.” (Luke 2:37)

David, prophet and king, said, “I humbled myself with fasting.” (Psalms 35:13) “My knees are weak through fasting, And my flesh is feeble from lack of fatness.” (Psalms 109:24)

Even Ahab, the wicked king, upon hearing the words of Elijah about the catastrophes that were about to happen to him, rent his clothes, put sackcloth upon his flesh, fasted and went about mourning. Afterwards God told Elijah, “See how Ahab humbled himself before me? Because he humbled himself before Me, I will not bring the calamity in his days.” (1 Kings 21:29)

God spoke through Isaiah the prophet, about the acceptable fasting, its rules and its blessings. He said, “Is this not the fast that I have chosen: To loose the bonds of wickedness, To undo the heavy burdens, To let the oppressed go free, And that you break every yoke?” (Isaiah 58:6) Certainly, God delights with fasting and that Israel’s sin was due to their failure to follow the rules of the fast.

As for group fasting, we have the following examples: when the people of Nineveh fasted, (Jonah 3:5-10), when the Israelites fasted during their war with the Benjamites, (Judges 20:26) and the fasting of the people of Israel during the time of Samuel the prophet. (1 Samuel

7:6) Also, king Jehoshaphat declared a fasting throughout Judah when the Moabites and Ammonites came to fight him. (2 Chronicles 20:3) Again, Ezra asked all the people with him to fast when he was going to Jerusalem. He said, "Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before God. So we fasted and entreated our God for this, and He answered our prayer." (Ezra 8:21, 23)

Second: In the New Testament:

Fasting in the Old Testament **is continued in Christianity**. Jesus confirmed its necessity and effect in the believer's life when He fasted forty days and forty nights. **Obviously, our Lord did not need to fast. He fasted on behalf of all mankind, or in another words, the human race fasted through Him as He was considered the second Adam. He presented Himself as an example to teach us the way to victory in our struggles with the enemy.**

In the Sermon on the Mountain which is the "Constitution of Christianity", Jesus talked about fasting as a basic topic. (Matthew 6:16-18)

When John's disciples asked Jesus, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but Your disciples do not fast?" He answered, "Can the friends of the bridegroom mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and they will fast." (Matthew 9:14-15) Jesus also in a definitive way said about fasting, **"This kind (the devil) can come out by nothing but by prayers and fasting."** (Mark 9:29) These words contain the secret of victory in our spiritual struggle and our Lord has made it clear.

We see the effect of fasting and its practice in the Church of the New Testament after the bridegroom (Jesus) ascended to heaven. The writer of Acts wrote about fasting, "Then having fasted and prayed, they sent Barnabas and Paul away" (Acts 13:3) Also on the way to Italy, when St. Paul was on the ship a great storm arose and they were in danger; they fasted (Acts 27)

St. Paul talked about fasting in several places in his epistles. "In stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in fastings." (2 Corinthians 6:5) In another place, he said, "In hunger and thirst, in fastings often." (2 Corinthians 11:27) He talked to the husbands and wives saying, "Do not deprive one another except with consent for a time that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer." (1 Corinthians 7:5)

Third: In the Life of the Fathers of the Church:

History is full of great examples of God's people who attained high levels of holiness by fasting. All the saints, without any exception, fasted because they realized its benefits. They wrote about their experiences and were called "the fasters or those who fast" owing to their great love for fasting.

St. Basil the Great, Archbishop of Caesarea, never ate meat since he became an Archbishop. He used to wear hair sackcloth under his clothes. He said, **“We were expelled from the earthly paradise because we did not fast, therefore, we have to fast to return to the heavenly paradise.** Fasting restores to us all the losses due to Adam’s failure to fast, and it reconciles us with God.” He also said, “Fasting controls the powers of fire and shuts the lions’ mouths.” He was referring to the three youths in the furnace and to Daniel in the lions’ den.

St. John Chrysostom, Patriarch of Constantinople, used to eat only wet wheat throughout the period of his Patriarchate. He said regarding fasting, **“Fasting fights our enemies, delivers us from their bondage, and leads us to our true freedom.”** Do you want to know how can fasting protect people? Think of the ascetics, hermits, who used to flee from the noises of the world and live in caves on top of mountains in the solitude of the desert. They fast all their lives. They considered fasting their partner in life. Fasting made them like angels and enlightened them. Moses and Elijah fasted first before they could see God and talk to Him.

St. Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, said regarding the Holy Lent, “He, Who was free from every sin, fasted forty days, and you, sinner, do not like fasting. There is a new flood for forty days wherein God’s blessings keep pouring to drown our sins and preserve the virtues and holiness in our hearts.”

St. Jerome said, **“The Lord Himself sanctified His baptism by fasting forty days and taught us that the devils can be conquered by fasting and prayer.** St. Paul, after talking about hunger, thirst, all his tedious efforts and dangers from robbers, mentioned his many fasting. Adam obeyed his stomach much more than God; therefore, he was expelled from the paradise. Satan tempted even the Lord Jesus Himself by hunger. Everyone worships the one he loves; therefore let us exert all our efforts to fast and be ascetic so that we may go back to the paradise, from which we had been expelled because of our love of food.”

Mar Isaac said, “Fasting is the first step in God’s holy way. It is the reformer of all virtues, the beginning of struggle, the beauty of virginity, the upkeep of chastity, the father of prayer, the source of quietness, the teacher of silence and the announcer of blessings.” He also said, “God honored that weapon, which is fasting. Who can dare to despise it? **Since the Giver of the law Himself fasted, how can we, for whom the law was given, not fast?”**

St. Gregory of Cyprus said, “He, who is greedy for food, gets bad dreams. He, who does not eat much, is sober. As the weather gets dark with fog, so does the mind gets cloudy if the stomach is full of food.”

The Power of Fasting:

The best example, which shows the effectiveness of fasting, is that of the people of Nineveh. In spite of God’s threat to destroy the city after forty days, when He saw their fasting

and meekness, He forgave them. “God relented from the disaster that He has said He would bring upon them and He did not do it.” (Jonah 3:10)

Is it possible that God relents? Indeed, this is the result of fasting. Truly all the people of Nineveh had fasted, young and old. They, including the king, covered themselves with sackcloth and sat in ashes. Even the animals did not eat or drink. They all cried to the Lord Who forgave them. St. John Chrysostom comments on this event by saying, “God has honored fasting and granted anyone who honored it deliverance from death. Fasting is effective to such an extent that after the punishment of death was issued, it was removed not only for two, three, ten or twenty people, but for a whole nation like Nineveh.

After God spoke to Isaiah about the essence of fasting and its ideal method, He spoke about its blessings, its power and the promises associated with it. He said, **“Then your light shall break forth like the morning, Your healing shall spring forth speedily, And your righteousness shall go before you; The glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call and the LORD will answer; You shall cry, and He will say, 'Here I am.’”** (Isaiah 58:8-9) We need to meditate on each of these promises.

St. Jerome talking about Daniel, who shut the mouths of the lions by fasting, said, “How great is fasting! It tamed the lions and frightened the devils!” St. Augustine said, “Do you want your prayers to rise up to heaven? Let your prayers have two wings which are fasting and alms.”

C) WHY DO I FAST?

1. Much food stirs up desires:

There is a correlation between man's energy and his actions. For example, strong and forceful men, having more energy than they naturally need, have more tendency to get angry, kill and probably commit adultery more than those who are weak. They are more likely to use that energy in an outward activity. **It is known that man's energy is greatly related to the quality and quantity of the food he eats.**

The concept of fasting is based on that fact. It is a spiritual exercise intended to subdue the body in addition to limiting its nutrition. Hence, no great energy would result from the eaten food, which the individual might not be able to utilize properly. John Casian wrote, “When the stomach is full of all kinds of food, this gives rise to the seeds of immorality. You cannot direct and control your thoughts properly when the stomach is full of food.”

Drunkenness is not the only factor, which destroys the mind, but also the indulgence in eating. It takes away its power of clear thinking. The destruction of Sodom was not due to drunkenness only but also to the indulgence in food. The Lord rebuked Jerusalem saying, “This was the iniquity of your sister Sodom, fullness of food” (Ezekiel 16:49) Because of their fullness

of food, they were kindled with the lust of the flesh. St. Filex said, "Heavy foods vanquish the body members with desires."

2. Fasting is a strong bridle for the body:

It is a fact that the human being lives in a lusty troublesome body that craves for everything physical and material. This body strongly pulls the person down and makes him do things that he does not want to do. **"For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish."** (Galatians 5:17) "For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good. 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. O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (Romans 7:19-24)

We thus need strong bridles to control the body and subdue it. **No doubt that the best bridle is fasting.** Our fathers, the saints, have experienced this and recorded their experiences. **Mar Isaac the Syrian said, "Every struggle against the body and its lust should start with fasting, especially if it concerns our inner sin."** St. Jerome said, "Our Lord God, the Creator, does not benefit from our empty stomachs, but this is a means to preserve our chastity." St. John Asuity said, **"Fasting to our desires is as water to fire."** One of the fathers said, "Be sure that the enemy attacks the heart when the stomach is full."

3. Fasting is the first step on the spiritual road:

The human being is made up of a body and a spirit. In as much as one of them dominates the other, the person becomes either spiritual or physical. If one wants to become spiritual, one has to overcome his body and bring it into subjection. Our Savior Jesus Christ has given us an example. After He had been baptized, He fasted forty days and nights. All those who want to walk in newness of life have to start the road of the spirit and the new life by fasting. St. Matthew wrote, "Then was Jesus led up **by the Spirit** into the wilderness." (Matthew 4: 1) In the wilderness, He fasted.

Mar Isaac the Syrian explains, "When our Lord began His ministry in the world, He started from this point. After He had been baptized, He was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness and fasted forty days and forty nights. All those who want to follow His steps have to start their struggle by fasting like Him."

St. John Casian said, "We cannot start the struggle with our inner person unless we get rid of the vice of gluttony. We have to prove first that we are freed from submitting to the body, "for by whom a person is overcome, by him also he is brought into bondage." (2 Peter 2:19) St. Paul struggling according to the laws of the battle said, "Therefore I run thus, not with uncertainly. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified." (1

Corinthians 9:26-27) St. Paul directed the main part of his struggle toward his body, and he made the result of the battle simply depend on subduing it.

We are not afraid of an outside enemy; our enemy is rather inside us. We fight every day an inner war. If we win, there is then no outside enemy as long as we conquer the inside one and subdue it to the authority of the spirit.

4. Fasting paves the way to virtues and gifts:

Since fasting is the starting point on the spiritual road, there is no doubt that **it prepares us for virtues. St. Felix said, “In as much as the body is ascetic, it has fellowship with the spirit. As long as the body is full of food, it pulls the soul down and ties the wings of its thoughts.** If it is empty, it submits to the will of the soul easily and the soul attracts it to everything it chooses.” He also said, “When any person sets on the way of righteousness, **he starts by fasting, for without asceticism all other virtues like prayer, thoughts and mind are not pure, and the inner man cannot be renewed.”**

In the early days, the holy books were written on dried animal skin. Likewise, if the soul is not dried with fasting and asceticism, God cannot write His word on it. Isaiah said, “Whom will He teach knowledge? And whom will He make to understand the message? Those just weaned from milk? Those just drawn from the breasts?” (Isaiah 28:9) Who are those weaned from the milk and drawn from the breasts except those who have forsaken the love of the world and the flesh, overcoming the desires by fasting and asceticism?

The softest wind can lift up the bird’s feather as long as nothing is sticking to it. But if it is wet or dirt is sticking to it, the wind cannot lift it up. Likewise, the person who is tied up with physical desires cannot rise up spiritually to the heavenly matters through God’s grace, which visits us from time to time,

Jesus warns us saying, “Take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness and cares of this life.” (Luke 21:34) Likewise, **when you throw a green plant in the fire.** The fire does not inflame it right away, but it takes a while until the fire removes all the humidity. If the plant had been dry, the fire would have inflamed it right away.

Similarly, one may be regular in many spiritual ways, but still he complains of spiritual dryness and is not visited by God’s grace. **The fire of the divine love cannot inflame his heart unless he first gets rid of the desires of the body by fasting and other ascetic works.**

5. Fasting rectifies the body and trains the senses:

David, said, “I humbled myself with fasting.” (Psalms 35:13) St. Paul says, “I discipline my body and bring it into subjection.” (1 Corinthians 9:27) The expression “discipline” is usually used in revolutions. What does any nation do to control any revolution? It captures those who are revolting and puts them in prison. This is what fasting does. The body revolts. We capture the body and its senses by not giving them the things they desire. **Therefore, fasting is**

considered a period for rectifying the body by training its revolting senses with spiritual exercises. When you do not give the body food and drink within reason, it has to yield and submit to the spirit.

Summing up, fasting, besides its training to the body and senses, leads to the purity of the soul. St. John Casian said, “Our fathers experienced fasting everyday and found it useful, leading to the purity of the soul, and they ordered us not to have a full stomach, not even of simple bread or water.”

6. Fasting gives us will power:

Adam sinned because his will had weakened when confronted with outside temptations. Any person sins either because he is deceived by temptations, or his will weakens towards his desires and he knows before hand that he can not fight the temptations. Here comes the importance of the will power. **Fasting**, especially when skipping breakfast, **is one of the best means for strengthening the human will power.** When one fasts, he overcomes his desire for food and this leads him gradually to overcome temptations of all kinds.

D) HOW DO I FAST?

1. By controlling oneself:

The idea of fasting is based on the fact that it is not a goal in itself, but rather a means. St. John Casian said, “Fasting is important as a means which leads to purity of heart and not as a goal in itself.” One of the expressions of fasting in the Coptic language is, “controlling the inside.” meaning oneself.

This is the true understanding of fasting, as explained in the writings of the fathers. St. Felix said, “Anything placed on the table which you find that your eye desires, do not eat it. If your stomach gets used to that, it will not ask for anything more than its own needs.” He also said, “It is more suitable for you to eat meat without craving than to eat lentils with craving. We are not blamed when we eat food, but we are blamed if we eat it with craving, whether it is meat or beans.”

St. John Casian wrote, “Let us be confident that the outside fasting of food is enough for the purity of the heart and body, accompanied by the fasting of oneself. The self has harmful kinds of food that if it gets used to, would lead to hell. Anger, jealousy, envy, hatred, and slander, which is one of its favorite, are all kinds of food harmful to the self and lead to destruction. If we prevent ourselves with all our strength from eating these harmful kinds of food by a holy fast, then our physical fasting will be useful and fruitful.

The labor of the body, if accompanied by a broken spirit, presents an acceptable sacrifice to God, and builds storage for holiness that is very valuable inside the pure heart. **If the body**

only fasts and we are still bound to many sins and certain spiritual vices, then we will not benefit from subduing the body as long as a precious part in us is defiled. Therefore, when the outer man fasts, we should control also the inner man from harmful food. St. Paul urges us to present that inner man pure and holy to be worthy of receiving Christ inside us. “That Christ may dwell in your hearts” (Ephesians 3:17)

The easiest kind of fasting is that related to feeding the body. Although this has many advantages, it is also a means to practice the other kinds of fasting. How easy it is for a man to deprive himself of special kinds of food, yet how hard it is for him to prevent his mind from pondering on different thoughts. **Happy is the man who can do the fasting of the soul and the fasting of the mind, and then he can eat whatever he wants. No doubt, he will eat a spiritual food and feed on every word that comes out of the mouth of God. “My food is to do the will of My Father.”**

2. Humility:

We have mentioned that the main purpose of fasting is to control and refine the desires of the self; therefore, **repentance, sorrow, regret and humility should accompany fasting.** David, said, “As for me, when they were sick, My clothing was sackcloth; **I humbled myself with fasting.**” (Psalms 35:13)

St. Jerome said, “When the condition of the son of David became grave, after his sin of adultery, David repented by sitting in ashes. He said that he ate ashes like bread and mingled his drink with weeping (Psalms 102:9) and his knees were weak through fasting (Psalms 19:24). Though, Nathan, the prophet, had told him; “The Lord has put away your sin.” (2 Samuel 12:13)

God is pleased with the humility of a repentant soul. Isaiah says, “**Why have we fasted, say they, and You have not seen? Why have we afflicted our soul, and You take no notice? In fact, in the day of your fast you find pleasure, And exploit all your laborers. Indeed you fast for strife and debate, And to strike with the fist of wickedness.** You will not fast as you do this day, To make your voice heard on high. **Is it a fast that I have chosen, A day for a man to afflict his soul? Is it to bow down his head like a bulrush, And to spread sackcloth and ashes? Would you call this a fast, And an acceptable day to the LORD?** (Isaiah 58:3-5)

God’s people understood the true meaning of fasting and knew how to get God’s mercy. **When the people of Nineveh repented,** “They proclaimed a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them. Then word came to the king of Nineveh; and he arose from his throne and laid aside his robe; covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes.” (Jonah 3:5-6)

God is pleased with such an affliction coming out of a repenting and broken soul. We notice that when Elijah told Ahab, the wicked king, all the catastrophes that would happen to him and his house, “He tore his clothes and put sackcloth on his body, and fasted and lay in sackcloth and went about mourning.” The Lord said to Elijah, “See how Ahab has humbled himself before Me? Because he humbled himself before Me, I will not bring the calamity in his days; but in the days of his son I will bring the calamity on his house.” (1 Kings 21:27-29)

Therefore, fasting is not only practiced during the times the church arranged by the guidance of the Holy Spirit but also in times of trouble, difficulties and tribulations. (2 Samuel 1:12; Daniel 6:18; 2 Samuel 12:16; Esther 4:16)

3. Fasting and the “Period of Abstinence”:

There is no fasting without a period of abstinence. All fasts must be practiced by abstaining from food for a period, and then one may eat food free from animal products. The period of abstinence is a foundation in fasting, whether in its meaning, its purpose, its exercise, or its results.

A Christian who eats breakfast at his regular time, then eats fasting food may think that he is fasting, but he has broken an important aspect of fasting, **“the period of abstinence.” Fasting is not only depriving oneself from certain kinds of food, but also has an element of hunger.** When our Lord fasted, the Bible says **“Afterward He was hungry.”** (Matthew 4:2) The book of Acts says, **“Peter went up on the housetop to pray, about the sixth hour Then he became very hungry and wanted to eat.”** (Acts 10:9-10)

In the Old Testament, the period of abstinence in fasting was clear. When **Moses fasted, he did not eat or drink.** (Exodus 34:28) **In the book of Judges,** we find that abstinence was observed until the evening. **“Then all the children of Israel, that is, all the people, went up and came to the house of God and wept. They sat there before the LORD and fasted that day until evening.”** (Judges 20:26) When God described to Ezekiel how to fast, He told him, **“And your food which you eat shall be by weight; from time to time you shall eat it. You shall drink also water by measure; from time to time you shall drink.”** (Ezekiel 4: 10-11) **In Nineveh’s fasting, the people did not taste anything.** (Jonah 3:7)

4. Moderation in fasting:

We have discussed in the last point the period of abstinence during fasting. We would like to say here that this practice is not obligatory to everyone. Fasting in Christianity, like any other spiritual exercise, is not an obligation. **The period of abstinence is not left to the believer to decide for himself, but by his spiritual father. We strongly emphasize that fasting may lead to bad consequences. The Church fathers have a famous advice in this issue, “Do not excessively weaken your body to the extent that your enemies laugh at you.”**

In fact, all the saints advised the moderation in fasting. St. Jerome wrote to Demitrias, the virgin, saying, **“No matter what, I do not want to oblige you to fast and abstain from food more than your capacity, for such exercise may easily weaken your body and cause physical illnesses rather than lead to a holy life.” Mar Isaac the Syrian said, “Beware not to exaggerate in fasting to the extent of weakening your body and becoming lazy and cold. Balance your life in the scale of knowledge.”**

The philosophers say that all virtues are mere means and an exaggeration is a vice. Do not exaggerate in fasting until you feel your heart will fail and you need others to help you or carry you. While you are subduing the desires of the body, you have to keep some physical

strength so that you may be able to read the Holy Scriptures, to sing the psalms and to keep awake. **Fasting, in itself, is not a complete virtue, but it is a foundation upon which other virtues can be built. It is a step towards the holy road.**

Again, fasting strenuously or without discrimination is not good; weakening the body may lead to the inability of the mind to control the thoughts. St. John Casian said, “We cannot apply one rule in fasting, for we do not all have the same physical strength. Fasting is not like the other virtues that can be developed by controlling the mind only, but it depends rather on the ability of the body.

There is a difference in the period of abstinence and the kind and amount of food according to the person’s age, sex and the condition of the body. In spite of that, there is one goal of fasting, which is subduing the body proportionately to the spiritual level and the ability of the mind to control the desires.”

If we have talked about moderation in fasting for those who are able, **what about those who are sick, the old, pregnant women or those who nurse their babies?** The fact that fasting is not a goal in itself has to be very clear. Those who have weak bodies can develop these virtues equal to those who fast strenuously. St. John Casian said, “The weakness of a body is not an obstacle toward a pure heart, on condition that the food he eats is not for enjoyment but for his sick body.”

The church organized the periods of abstinence; but the church also has the authority to excuse some members through the power given to the priests by our Lord Jesus Himself. That is to arrange their fasting in a special way to fit their spiritual levels and physical abilities.

5. Fasting and the kind of food:

There is a close correlation between the character of a person and the kind of food he eats. The German philosopher, Foyer Bach, said, “**The human being is what he eats,**” that is we can know a person’s habits and interests from the food he eats.

In addition to the period of abstinence from eating and drinking, **one must refrain from the kinds of food derived from animals and of their byproducts. The church received this tradition from the apostles. Again, the Lord said to Ezekiel, “Take for yourself wheat, barley, beans, millet, and spelt; put them in one vessel, and make bread of them for yourself. During the number of the days that you lie on your side.”** (Ezekiel 4:9)

St. Jerome wrote to Yostokhiom the virgin saying, “During Elijah’s escape from Isabel, when he was lying all alone and exhausted under the oak tree, the angel came and woke him up asking him to eat. He found by his head a cake and some water in a cruse. Could not God have sent him delicious wine, cooked food and broiled meat if He had wanted to? Also, Daniel could have eaten delicious food from the king’s table. He was called “A man of desires” because he refused to eat the desired food or drink the wine of lust.”

The kind of food during fasting is important. We cannot abstain from food then later eat whatever we want. This may cause a man to become greedier for food, so that he may resemble a lion that they keep hungry to become wilder in order to devour a man, as used to happen in the early ages. When we fast, we do not eat food from animals reproduced by lust. Fish, which is allowed during some fasts, is not reproduced by lust because fertilization occurs outside the body of the female.

6. Fasting does not weaken the body:

It is a must for us to discuss this point since it occupies the mind of many Christians that fasting does weaken the body and makes a person feel hungry quickly because fasting food lacks nutritional values. **Truly, we get hungry more quickly because we are carnal and our senses are centered in our bodies. When the stomach gets empty, we feel that quickly. However, a person who is busy with divine matters does not feel the hunger of the body so easily because the body is not the center of his attention. When the soul is filled, it can lift the body, too.**

How often we forget to eat without intending to fast when we are busy with an important matter in which our emotions and attentions are centered. **“I will lift up my hands in Your name. My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness.”** (Psalms 63:4-5) Not only does the joy of the Lord satisfy the soul and makes it forget food, but it also makes us sorry for our sins. **“My heart is stricken and withered like grass, So that I forget to eat my bread.”** (Psalms 102:4)

When the soul is satisfied with God, it is elevated above food. Why? Because it does not have time for the works of the body. The spirit has pulled the body to work with it; therefore, the body does not have time for food. When the body is disciplined with spiritual work, it forgets its desires and the need of the stomach is subdued for a while. The food of the spirit fills the body as if it is a “spiritual body,” especially during that period. Solomon said, “A satisfied soul loathes the honeycomb, But to a hungry soul every bitter thing is sweet.” (Proverbs 27:7) Notice that he said, “a satisfied soul” and not body.

Hence when the soul is filled, the body is filled too, until it reaches a state of natural fasting wherein there is no feeling of hunger. It is fasting from physical food, for the soul and the body together are eating spiritual food. It is amazing that the carnal body eats spiritual food. Solomon said, “A good report makes the bones healthy” (Proverbs 15:30)

Poor is the man who makes his body fast, yet does not offer his soul its divine food that the body shares. Listen to what Joel said, “Consecrate a fast, Call a sacred assembly” (Joel 2:15) A sacred assembly is an opportunity for prayer. Fasting and prayer both go together; that is why the church during the Holy Lent, repeats the words, “Fasting and prayer” in the fractions.

Our drawback, when we imitate the saints, is that we take some of the points in their lives, not their whole lives. Look at St. Paula and see how he was able to eat only half a loaf of bread daily, and how he continued like that for tens of years. He did not collapse while he was young and departed when he was very old.

How did the saints endure abstinence from food for several days? How were they able to fast and pray with bowing (Matanias) many times? The truth is that God's grace helped and supported them. Did God's grace help them in a miraculous way? Certainly not. We say that God's grace is a permanent help, both natural and miraculous! While the body is engaged in spiritual work, it eats from the food of the spirit.

The spirit can lift it up and give it a special strength different from that supplied by food. This is exactly what had happened with Daniel and the three young men; Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. In spite of the fact that they did not want to eat from the king's meat or drink from his wine and insisted on eating beans, at the end of ten days their countenances appeared fairer and fatter in flesh than all the youth who ate a portion of the king's meat. (Daniel 1: 8-15)

Therefore, this matter needs faith in God's promises and the practice of spiritual work to help us in our physical struggle.

7. Fasting and spiritual exercises:

The saints built up their spiritual lives through exercise. "I myself always strive to have a conscience without offense towards God and men" (Acts 24:16) **Fasting is considered a preliminary step toward accomplishing spiritual exercises successfully.** The purpose of the spiritual exercise is for the soul to be accustomed to practicing specific virtues. However, if the body is uncontrollable, it is difficult to succeed in such exercises.

Hence, fasting which subdues the body and overcomes it, is an important exercise. Moreover, fasting helps in the success of other exercises. **The exercise of keeping silent is one of the best exercises on which one can train oneself during fasting.**

8. Prayer to accompany fasting:

The Lord said to His apostles, "This kind can come out by nothing but by prayer and fasting." (Mark 9:29) **This emphasizes the fact that prayer and fasting go together.** We read this fact in more than one place in the Holy Bible. The book of Acts says, "As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, "Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." **Then having fasted and prayed** and laid hands on them, they sent them away." (Acts 13:2-3). And when Paul and Barnabas had ordained priests in every church and **prayed with fasting**, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. (Acts 14:23)

St. Paul said to married couples, "Do not deprive one another except with consent for a time, that you may give yourselves to **fasting and prayer.**" (1 Corinthians 7:5)

Our holy fathers compared fasting to a fort and prayer to a weapon with which one fights from inside the fort. St. Augustine said, "The temple which Solomon built had two altars, one outside upon which the sacrifices were offered, and the other inside for the holies, that is, the altar of incense.

Likewise, any person who is a temple of the Holy Spirit, should have two altars: one within, which is the heart where the incense of prayer is offered, as the Lord said, “When you pray enter your closet, that is your heart.” The other altar is outside wherein the body is offered as a sacrifice through fasting and various types of piety.” St. Paul said, “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God.” (Romans 12:1)

The Song of Solomon said, “Who is this that comes out of the wilderness Like pillars of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense?” (Song 3:6) This verse refers to the soul coming out of the wilderness of this world, victorious by the grace of the Savior Whom it loved. It is a soul perfumed with myrrh, referring to fasting, and frankincense, referring to prayer. But is myrrh a perfume? Why did the spirit say that the soul is perfumed with myrrh? Indeed, fasting and piety are truly beautiful perfumes that remove the bad odor of sin and bring the nice odor of Christ.

In our spiritual life, fasting and prayer cannot be separated. If we compare fasting to the flaming charcoal, prayer would be the frankincense. Both of them compliment one another. When both are united, the result is a nice aroma that perfumes the soul.

9. Fasting and giving alms:

The Lord clarified in His sermon on the mountain, the three basic factors in Christian worship: prayer, fasting, and giving alms. **As prayer accompanies fasting, so do alms, in order for the fasting to be acceptable.** The Lord made this clear through His speech to Isaiah about acceptable fasting, “Is not this the fast that I have chosen: To loose the bonds of wickedness, To undo the heavy burdens, To let the oppressed go free, And that you break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, And that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out; When you see the naked, that you cover him, And not hide yourself from your own flesh?” (Isaiah 58:6-7) When God talked about Sodom’s sin, He mentioned besides the fullness of bread (neglecting fasting), that it did not strengthen the hand of the poor and needy. (Ezekiel 16:49)

10. Fasting and marital relations:

Since fasting is an important factor in subduing the desires of the body, it has, therefore, to be honored by keeping the body pure. The church forbids marital relations during all periods of fasting and considers them non-fasting. Since anyone who is fasting abstains from food that is essential for life, likewise he should abstain from marital relations that are not essential for life, as compared to food.

Avoiding marital relations goes side by side with fasting and agrees with the spirit of asceticism. This does not mean that marital relations are a defiling act, but they are not considered fasting. Avoiding them is like avoiding food, just for temperance. It is written in the Bible, **“Blow the trumpet in Zion, Consecrate a fast, Call a sacred assembly; Let the bridegroom go out from his chamber And the bride out of her dressing room.”** (Joel 2:15-

16) Avoiding marital relations during fasting periods has to be done upon the consent of both husband and wife so that neither of them would deviate or bring a sin upon himself or upon the other. This is what St. Paul advised. (1 Corinthians 7:5)

E) ADVICE AND GUIDELINES

1. The exercise of fasting is an interesting training, but we emphasize that you should consult your spiritual father to set limits for the period of abstinence.

2. Fasting is not meant to weaken the body but to subdue it. The body is a gift that you must take care of. Also a sane mind is in a healthy body.

God asked us to overcome the body, not to kill it. The church permits old people, babies, pregnant and nursing mothers, the sick, the weak, young children and those with special circumstances not to abstain from food during fasting periods. The body is the vehicle by which you cross the wilderness of this world. Do not be permissive to your body to the point of becoming enslaved to it, nor be harsh to it to the extent of becoming unable to continue the road. “Let all things be done decently and in order.”(1 Corinthians 14:40)

3. What has been written in this book about fasting is written for everyone; for people with different spiritual levels and various health conditions. **Therefore, do not try to apply everything you have read, regardless of your health condition, your spiritual level and the effort you exert at work.** Remember St. Paul’s words, “For I say through the grace given to me, to every man who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, according as God has dealt to each one the measure of faith.” (Romans 12:3)

Spiritual life is not imitation of others. It needs a long gradual struggle. It is good to be eager to imitate the saints, however, it is good to be wise and sober. Do not look to the end of their lives after they have struggled for a long time, but rather to the beginning of their struggle, and imitate that.

4. The sick and the weak are special cases. St. Bersnofios answered one of his sick disciples who was suffering because of his inability to fast saying, “**Fasting is meant to subdue the body. So if the body is already subdued by sickness, then the goal of fasting has been achieved.**”

5. Never give excuses that you are unable to fast. Do not let your body deceive you by pretending it is weak, or might become weak by fasting. The contrary is true; fasting gives manpower and energy and prevents many causes that may shorten one’s life. Most of the

vegetarians live very long. St. Jerome said, “It is better that your stomach gets sick and not your soul. It is better that your knees tremble than your purity is shaken. Therefore, subdue and enslave your body so that you may not be shamed.”

St. John Casian said, “It is astonishing that though we take good care of our health and eat delicious, nutritional food, and walk in the fresh air, we are still susceptible to many diseases. Whereas the saints, who subdued their bodies by continuous prayer and fasting, are more healthy. While our bodies, which are taken good care of, rot and give off bad smell after death, the saints’ bodies, which are neglected and subdued, remain perfumed with a good smell even after death.”

6. Do not desire specific kinds of food while fasting. There are many delicious kinds of food but their nutritional value is very little. On the other hand, there are other kinds of food, not as tasty, yet they are very nutritious. Do not seek enjoyment in the food you eat, but rather select what is nutritious for your body.

Many people prepare a variety of tasty kinds of food during fasting, not less than the variety prepared when they are not fasting. **Fasting has to be observed with piety and mortification.** Treat your body as if you are a doctor to a sick person. Give your body what is beneficial even if it does not like it.

7. Mingle your physical fasting with another kind of fasting by exercising your senses to fast from sin and evil; specially anger, passing judgement and lust.

8. Mingle your fasting with meditation, thinking of the occasion for fasting. For example, during the Holy Lent, remember your Lord Jesus when He, the Holy and Righteous, fasted forty days and forty nights. On Wednesdays, remember when Judas betrayed his Lord and ask yourself if you betray Jesus and for how much? Whenever you commit sin, you betray Him. You, who had been sanctified with His blood and made vows to Him, remember your betrayal to Him and repent. When you fast on Fridays, remember the Savior’s sufferings for you. Think of what your sins have caused to your Lord Jesus Christ, and be sorry for them, and so on.

9. If you want your fasting to be acceptable, present it free of evil and hypocrisy. The scribes and Pharisees used to fast, but the Lord did not accept their fasting because of their hypocrisy. (Luke 18:9-14) “Thus said the LORD to His people: “They have not restrained their feet. Therefore the LORD does not accept them; He will remember their iniquity now, And punish their sin. When they fast, I will not hear their cry; and when they offer burnt offering and grain offering, I will not accept them. But I will consume them by the sword, by the famine and by pestilence.” (Jeremiah 14:10-12) **Incense when mingled with dirt, loses its nice aroma; likewise, God does not delight with fasting which is accompanied by sin.**

F) FASTS OF THE COPTIC CHURCH

1. The oldest and most important fasts of the Coptic church are Holy Lent, the Passion Week, Wednesdays and Fridays. These were mentioned in the Canons of the Apostles and by St. Basil the Great and others. The church was very strict in implementing these fasts to the extent that it used to punish those who did not fast them without acceptable excuses. These three fasts are concerned with occasions related to the Lord Jesus Himself.

The Holy Lent is a commemoration of the forty days and forty nights that Jesus fasted. Wednesdays commemorate His betrayal; Fridays commemorate His crucifixion, and the Passion Week commemorates His suffering. We notice that the Holy Lent is put apart from the Holy Week.

2. The Apostles' fast is one of the oldest since the Apostles themselves fasted it. It is written in the Didache that in the past, they fasted one week for the descent of the Holy Spirit, then they further fasted one or two more weeks. But in our days, the Apostles' fast is not limited to a certain number of days, for it always ends on Abib 5; July 12, which is the feast of the commemoration of the martyrdom of St. Peter and St. Paul. It does not start on a fixed day for it depends on when the day of Pentecost is, which in turn varies according to Easter.

3. The rest of the fasts in the Coptic Church are:

- A) **The Advent**, fasting before Christmas, which is 43 days long starting November 25 (Hatour 16) and ends on Christmas, January 7 (Kiahk 29).
- B) **Nineveh's fast**, (Jonah) which is three days long, to commemorate the repentance of the people of Nineveh. It starts two weeks before the Holy Lent.
- C) **St. Mary's fast** is fifteen days long always ending on August 22 (Misra 16), the feast of the assumption of her body to heaven.
- D) **The day before Christmas and the day before Epiphany (Baramon):** Christians used to abstain from food these two days to prepare themselves to receive the blessings of the feasts.

4. The above mentioned fasts differ in their rituals, the period of abstinence and in the kinds of food. No fish is to be eaten during the Holy Lent, the day before Christmas and Epiphany. The same applies to Wednesdays and Fridays. The custom of the early church during the Passion Week was to abstain from food followed by eating bread and salt only. The weak were allowed to eat but have no desserts. Fish is allowed in the rest of the fasts.

5. The period of abstinence used to be until sunset during the Holy Lent, until 3:00 p.m. during the rest of the fasting days. However, we advise that the period of abstinence be determined by the spiritual father according to each person's physical health and spiritual state.

6. There is no period of abstinence on Saturdays and Sundays during the whole year except for the Saturday before Easter when Jesus was in the sepulchre. There is no fasting at all during the fifty days after Easter. This is the only period when there is no fasting even on Wednesdays and Fridays. Fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays is not allowed if they coincide with a feast for Jesus Christ like Christmas or Epiphany.

7. Matanias (worshipping while bowing) go along with fasting, but when fasting is not allowed, this kind of worship is not allowed either; such as, during the fifty days after Easter, on feasts for the Lord Jesus and on Saturdays and Sundays. Matanias are allowed during the rest of the year.

CHAPTER 3

ALMSGIVING

"Blessed is he who considers the poor; the Lord will deliver him in time of trouble"

(Psalm 41:1)

- A) A general word about giving**
- B) God's commands about giving**
- C) How do we offer our alms?**
- D) Tithes**
- E) Some objections against giving**
- F) Examples of generous givers**

A) A GENERAL WORD ABOUT GIVING

Christianity and giving go hand in hand and never separate; giving in its different forms and kinds - starting from material giving - which is the lowest kind of giving - to soul giving which is the most noble of all.

Giving (alms), prayer, and fasting form a rope of three strands. It is strong and never breaks if we associate or tie our selves with it. For we thus secure our safety and deliverance, like the rope which ties the ship to the dock. There is no wonder in that, since prayer is worshipping God with our spirit, fasting is worshipping Him with our bodies, and alms (or giving) is our worship or showing our love to Him with our material riches.

This is what the early Christians understood and what the early Church followed. Perhaps we find this trend clearly stated in the words of St. Paul to the priests of Ephesus as he told them "Remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, **"It is more blessed to give than to receive"**" (Acts 20:35)

On this subject we do not speak about giving in its general meaning but rather we limit ourselves to material giving or alms, though we prefer the former term (giving).

In the materialistic society in which we live, people compete for everything material, and shy away from everything intellectual and spiritual. Materialistic norms have become the common ones and the level of spiritual values have gone down in the eyes of people. Due to their lukewarm feeling towards religion, people are stingy in their giving or they give nothing at all. This is contrary to the dawn of Christianity and its Apostolic era when the believers used to sell their possessions and bring the proceeds of the things that were sold to the Church and the Church distributed to each as anyone had need (Acts 4:34, 35).

We realise how difficult it is for people with middle income to make ends meet, let alone the poor and the penniless. Yet, in spite of that, we are certain of the many blessings which the Lord has prepared for the merciful, not only in the life to come but also in this life.

GOD AND RICHES

Money is a big idol among the idols of our time, which many people worship and for which they have made a golden throne in their hearts. It has misled many, hardened their hearts, closed their eyes, deafened their ears. They are no longer able to feel the pain of others, see their misery or hear their cries. **This idol (money) is so mighty that some see it as equivalent to God; it is their only god.**

The Lord Jesus Who knows the thoughts of human hearts said "You cannot serve God and mammon" (Luke 16:13). He said to the rich young ruler who came running, to ask Him

what should he do that he may inherit eternal life?, Jesus said to him "One thing you lack: Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow Me". St. Mark says "But the rich man was sad at this word, and went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions". **Christ commented on this incident by saying "Children, how hard it is for those who trust in riches to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (Mark 10:17-25). The Lord Jesus also said "Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses" (Luke 12:15).**

Hence money, loving it, trusting in it, the desire to make, collect and keep it, constitute a serious spiritual illness which takes us away from God and His fellowship. The lovers of money have their logic which convinces them, such as "save for a rainy day", and other sayings. We wish now to know the teaching of the Holy Bible on the subject of money.

Someone may say that the Lord's words to the young man "those who trust in riches", did not mean the rich people at all. That is true, since the Lord Himself is the source of riches "The Lord makes poor and makes rich; he brings low and lifts up (1 Samuel 2:7). Also we read "As for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, and given him power to eat of it, ... this is the gift of God" (Ecclesiastes 5:19).

The Holy Bible records the names of some rich saints, among them are Abram, about whom is said "Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold" (Genesis 13:2), and Lot about whom is said "His possessions were so great" (Genesis 13:5, 6). Also Isaac whose crop God blessed and in one of the years it increased one hundred fold, and the Bible said about him "He continued prospering until he became very prosperous" (Genesis 26:13).

We do not have the time to speak about Jacob and his son Joseph whom God blessed and made successful that he became the lord of all the house of Pharaoh, and a ruler throughout all the land of Egypt (Genesis 26:13). Likewise David upon whom the Bible said "So he died in a good old age, full of days and riches and honor" (1 Chronicles 29:28), Jehoshaphat (2 Chronicles 17:5), Hezekiah about whom the Bible said "had very great riches and honor and he made himself treasuries for silver, for gold, for precious stones, for spices, for shields, and for all kinds of desirable items" (2 Chronicles 32:27) and Job who had so many possessions that he was the greatest of all the people of the East (Job 1:3).

We read in the New Testament about Joseph a rich man from Arimathea, who took the body of the Lord Jesus and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth (Matthew 27:57-59) and Zacchaeus (Luke 19:20), ... etc.

We come back to the words of the Lord Jesus to the rich young man and by His saying "How hard it is for those who trust in riches to enter the kingdom of God". We wish to know the meaning of trusting in riches, which is the focal point.

TRUSTING IN RICHES

It is the awareness of assurance and the comfort of having money and the feeling that it is a protecting power, saved for unexpected events and calamities, that constitutes trusting.

Rich men, undoubtedly know the needs of the poor and have in excess of their own needs. Yet the feeling of comfort in riches and trust in them, makes them prefer to keep them rather than to give from them to the needy. **Hence every rich person who collects riches for himself, or keeps them for his enjoyment or for his future expectations, and does not count himself a steward to distribute them to others, is trusting in his riches,** and the words of the Lord "How hard for him to enter the kingdom of God!" apply to him.

Money does not fall from the sky, rather riches are collected by those who love and care to collect them. We mentioned the names of some of the rich saints, yet the fact that someone has the desire to be rich is one of the most dangerous temptations he subjects himself to, which is liable to destroy him. **This is what the Apostle said "But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition" (1 Timothy 6:9)... "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows. But you, O man of God, flee these things ... "** (1 Timothy 10, 11).

In the past, the Lord said to His people "Beware that you do not forget the Lord your God by not keeping His commandments, His judgments, and His statutes which I command you today, **lest - when you have eaten and are full, and have built beautiful houses and dwell in them; and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and your gold are multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied; when your heart is lifted up, and you forget the Lord your God"** (Deuteronomy 8:11-14) ... This is man as his Creator knows him.

No wonder that man deviates and perishes when he chases after material things and works hard to collect them by any means. The Lord said "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Luke 12:34), and in His sermon on the mount He said "**You cannot serve God and wealth"** (Matthew 6:24). Knowing that, should we continue in our striving to collect wealth and dare to answer the last verse and say "But, we are able to serve God and mammon"? Let us judge ourselves and condemn ourselves, because as we condemn ourselves nobody will condemn us.

Even for those who have collected their riches in a legal way without the love of money, the fact that they keep them without thinking about the needs of others, contradicts the royal Christian law - love. It is supposed that the Christian believer has died to the world and its love "For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content" (1 Timothy 6:7, 8). It is clear that the Apostle wrote these words to all the believers and not to a particular group, as there were no monks in those days!

It is also supposed that the Christian does not live for himself, but loves his neighbour as himself. If a person owns many robes which he keeps for himself and beside him there are many naked men, and he shuts up his heart from them, the words of the Apostles apply to him "But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how

does the love of God abide in him?" (1 John 3:17) and "Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries that are coming upon you!" (James 5:1).

St. Jerome wrote in his message to a noble virgin from Rome "You should avoid the sin of the love of money. The Lord says if you are not trustworthy in what is for others, who will give you what is yours? What is for others is a lump of gold or silver and what is for you is the spiritual inheritance upon which it is said in another place "The ransom of a man's life is his riches" (Proverbs 13:8). But you may say who will care for me when I am old or sick? Listen to Jesus as He says to the Disciples "Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them" (Matthew 6:25, 26)".

St. Jerome continues "If you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin (Matthew 6:28). If you are hungry, you will hear how blessed are the poor and hungry among the people. Put these words always at your lips: Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there" (Job 1:21). The Lord will never leave a righteous man to die from hunger. The Psalmist says "I have been young, and now am old; yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his descendants begging bread" (Psalm 37:25). Ravens used to feed Elijah every morning and every evening (1 Kings 17:6). The widow of Zarephath, of Sidon, went away hungry that night in order to feed the prophet (1 Kings 17:12), and with a miracle the bin of flour with which she was going to feed the prophet was not used up (1 Kings 17:14)".

St. Jerome adds "Listen to the words of Jacob in his vow: "If God will be with me, and keep me in this way that I am going, **and give me bread to eat and clothing to put on ...** then the Lord shall be my God" (Genesis 28:20, 21). **Jacob prayed for the necessary materials only**, and twenty years after this vow he returned to the land of Canaan very rich in possessions and richer with children. **There is no end to the examples in the Bible which warn us against the love of money"**.

THE VIRTUE OF MERCY IN GENERAL

When we talk about giving or alms, we ought to talk about the virtue of mercy in general. **Alms alone - by itself - does not please God except for its motive** "If a man would give for love all the wealth of his house, it would be utterly despised" (Songs 8:7). God Who created the world and everything in it, was - without doubt - able to prepare sufficient wealth and riches for all of His creation. It is possible for God to make everybody rich. **But for an immense noble purpose, He allots differences between people, so as to give them opportunities to make good and to possess virtues that accompany blessings.** We shall see that rich and poor people are in need of each other on equal basis.

In the past - the Lord was careful to teach His people the principles of mercy, in the form of caring for the poor, the strangers, the widows and the fatherless.

He commanded His people saying "You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and

needy, whether one of your brethren or one of the aliens who is in your land within your gates. Each day you shall give him his wages, and not let the sun go down on it, for he is poor and has set his heart on it; lest he cry out against you to the Lord, and it be sin to you" (Deuteronomy 24:14, 15).

He also said "You shall not pervert justice due the stranger or the fatherless, nor take a widow's garment as a pledge. But you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this thing" (Deuteronomy 24:17, 18). Again He said by the tongue of Isaiah "Learn to do good; seek justice, rebuke the oppressor; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow" (Isaiah 1:17).

In a profound language the prophet David said "All my bones shall say, "Lord, who is like You, delivering the poor from him who is too strong for him, yes, the poor and the needy from him who plunders him?" (Psalm 35:10). He also said on the mouth of Hosea the prophet "For I desire mercy and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings" (Hosea 6:6).

Again in the past God commanded His people saying "Six years you shall sow your land and gather in its produce, but the seventh year **you shall let it rest and lie fallow, that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave, the beasts of the field** may eat. In like manner you shall do with your vineyard and your olive grove" (Exodus 23:10, 11). In this command, we see that the Lord not only cares for His children, **but also for the beasts of the field!**

In the New Testament we clearly find this virtue in the personality of the Lord Jesus. He called us to imitate our Heavenly Father in His mercy "Therefore be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful" (Luke 6:36). He said to the Jews "But go and learn what this means: I desire mercy and not sacrifice" (Matthew 9:13).

When His disciples were hungry, and began to pluck heads of grain and to eat them, and it was the Sabbath day, the Jews condemned them. Jesus defended His Disciples saying to the Jews "Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God and ate the showbread which was not lawful for him to eat, nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests? He then continued by saying "But if you had known what this means, **I desire mercy and not sacrifice**, you would not have condemned the guiltless" (Matthew 12:1-7).

There are many of such sayings, teachings and parables of Jesus which we shall mention later. St. James explained to us the superiority of the virtue of mercy when he said "**For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment**" (James 2:13).

St. John Chrysostom gave an interesting speech about mercy. He said "Mercy elevates man to a great height and earns him an immense familiarity with God. Such as the queen when she wants to see the king, none of the guards will dare to prevent her or to ask for the reason, and the members of the king's court would be glad to receive her. Likewise he who has mercy and gives alms sees the King on his throne without barriers. Because the Righteous One loves mercy very much and mercy is at His hand. It convinced Him to become a Man (incarnated) for our salvation. For this reason the Heavenly Father qualifies those who are merciful by the grace of giving".

He also said **"Mercy advances other virtues and it has an absolute power. For example if you fast but have no mercy, the toil of your fasting will not benefit you. Again, if you keep purity and celibacy which are unparalleled in honor by the greatest of other virtues, because by them you resemble the angels, you will not be able to be in the presence of God if you are not merciful.** Do you not see that the foolish (celibate) virgins were driven away from the presence of the Heavenly Groom for not acquiring the virtue of mercy with good deeds! (Matthew 25:12). How are the prudent wise virgins known? They are known from the fact that they combined celibacy with mercy, and they recognised the voice of the Heavenly Groom who said "I desire mercy and not sacrifice".

TO WHOM WE GIVE OUR ALMS

There is no one area for distributing our giving and spending our alms, but in total it does not go outside the circle of the Church and its members. Before tackling this matter, it is useful to discuss an important point which undoubtedly comes to the minds of many. That is: **would the case of the person asking us for alms, be examined before we give to him?**

There are two facets to this point, a personal one and a Church related one.

Concerning the personal facet, the Lord Jesus clarified for us an important principle by saying "Give to everyone who asks of you" (Luke 6:30, Matthew 5:42). The matter is clear; we are not responsible for examining the case of the person asking us for alms. The reward will be given to us in full according to our intent in giving the alms.

"He who receives a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward. And he who receives a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man's reward. And whoever gives one of these little ones only a cup of cold water in the name of a disciple, assuredly, I say to you, he shall by no means lose his reward" (Matthew 10:41, 42). These verses are clear by themselves; if you give alms to a person as if to a prophet, righteous man, a disciple of the Lord, you will receive the reward of this deed in full, even if the first person was a false prophet, the second an evil man and the third a liar.

The wisdom behind the words of the Lord Jesus is not to make ourselves judges who examine the affairs of others, but rather to be worshippers. Also we imitate our Heavenly Father when he said "For He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matthew 5:45). To verify that, the Lord Jesus concludes these words by saying "Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:48).

In the second, third and fourth centuries, there was a well known book entitled "The Shepherd" by Hermas. It was believed by many at that time, such as Origen, Osabious and Eronimos that Hermas is the person mentioned in the epistle to the Romans (Romans 16:14). Hermas writes **"Do good and from the production of your hands - which God gives you - give to all the needy in simplicity, without hesitation, to whom you are accustomed to give and to**

whom you are not. Give to all as God wants His giving be distributed to all. And those who take will give account to God, why and to which reason they have taken. Those who were in need and took will not be condemned. But those who took with false pretention will be punished. Hence he who gives is not blameworthy because as he accepted from God, likewise he completed his duty in simplicity without hesitation to those who are worthy and to those who are not worthy ...".

The book "Paradise of the Monks" tells us an interesting story about a hermit who gave his own robe to a poor man. When this hermit went to the market to sell some of his work and buy food, he saw an adulterous woman dressed in his robe. He was very upset and he wept. God wanted to teach him a lesson and put his thoughts to rest. The angel of the Lord appeared to him and told him "Do not be upset; as from the moment you offered your robe to the poor man, Christ has put on the robe, and you are not responsible for what had happened after that".

From what we said, I should give to those who ask without questioning. **But what do I do, if someone came to ask me for alms and I know that he is not in need of it or that he will spend it improperly, such as in drinking for example?** In this case, if the deceit is obvious, I should deny him the alms. The Lord Jesus did not mean by His command "Give to everyone who asks of you" (Luke 6:30), that we assist others to do evil.

It is also worth mentioning that we are commanded to do good to all, to both the believers and the nonbelievers. St. Paul said "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith" (Galatians 6:10). St. John Chrysostom says "We are not only bound to do mercy and care for our neighbours and those who share our faith, but also to the nonbelievers. According to the Law, if you see a fallen donkey, you help it to stand up without asking who owns it. If this is your responsibility towards an animal, how much should you care for the human without preference".

When the crowds followed the Lord Jesus in the wilderness, He fed everybody. Likewise, it is not merciful to search for those who deserve it only, but to help the helpless and give the needy their needs.

Concerning the second facet - the Church, or the officials - the Church should organize the matter and examine the cases. Order is a must. The Apostle Paul said to the Church of Corinth "Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given orders to the churches of Galatia, so you must do also: **On the first day of the week** let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come" (1 Corinthians 16:1, 2). Notice the organization of St. Paul "On the first day of the week".

Christianity which urges people to show mercy, separates between the needy and the lazy. St. Paul explained this fact in his letter to the Thessalonians "For you yourselves know how you ought to follow us, for we were not disorderly among you; nor did we eat anyone's bread free of charge, but worked with labor and toil night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, not because we do not have authority, but to make ourselves an example of how you should follow us. For even when we were with you, we commanded you this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat" (2 Thessalonians 3:7-10).

Concerning the purposes to which we give our alms, they are naturally numerous and it is not possible to mention all of them. But we can put them under two main headings. The first one is giving for bodily needs such as food for the hungry, clothes for the naked, spending on a needy sick person, sheltering a stranger, or easing the difficulties of someone, ... etc. The second purpose is giving for spiritual services such as for religious teachings, preaching in the villages, teaching the young in Sunday Schools, spending for buying books and publications for free distribution, or for selling them with cost prices.

Giving money to God is considered by itself a service. Some may be unable to serve God by their preaching or teaching, but can serve Him with their riches. The Holy Bible listed the names of some women who followed Jesus "who provided for Him from their substance" (Luke 8:3). Likewise is everyone who gives his substance for the purpose of spreading the spiritual conscience.

The second heading - and on top of its list - is fulfilling the needs of the service in the church, such as providing flour for making the Korban, wine, oil, incense, candles, church books and the altar vessels, ... etc. Included also is giving the ministers of religion, especially in the poor towns and villages. Most probably they do not have other sources of income, as they are not allowed to hold other professions. The Apostolic laws banned any bishop, priest or deacon to take for himself a worldly profession. The Israelites were commanded by God to be responsible for the expenses of the service at the Altar, and to present their tithes to the Levites, and this is what the Apostles taught in the New Testament.

St. Paul clarified this point to the Church of Corinth "Do we have no right to eat and drink? ... Whoever goes to war at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its fruit? Or who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk of the flock? Do I say these things as a mere man? Or does not the law say the same also? For it is written in the law of Moses, "You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain". Is it oxen God is concerned about? Or does He say it altogether for our sakes? For our sakes, no doubt, this is written, that he who plows should plow in hope, and he who threshes in hope should be partaker of his hope. If we have sown spiritual things for you, is it a great thing if we reap your material things? ... **Do you not know that those who minister the holy things eat of the things of the temple, and those who serve at the altar partake of the offerings of the altar? Even so the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel"** (1 Corinthians 9:4-14).

THE GREATNESS OF ALMSGIVING

Great is the virtue of giving alms, it deserves all honor, to the extent that when the Lord our God wanted to express it He said "**He who has pity on the poor lends to the Lord**, and He will pay back what he has given" (Proverbs 19:17). In order to show us the greatness of this virtue and to satisfy the hearts of the merciful and givers, the Lord portrays Himself as a borrower, He Who Himself owns everything.

St. John Chrysostom comments on the verse "He who has pity on the poor lends to the Lord" and says "If God borrows from us, He is indebted to us. Do you not want God to be indebted

to you, not a debtor to you, and you know that the inddebtor respects his debtor and the debtor is not timid from the inddebtor".

This virtue intercedes not only for the believers but also for the nonbelievers - it opens for them the door of faith and brings them to the sheepfold. This is what it did to Cornelius the centurion, an atheist, whom the Bible described as "A devout man and one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people" (Acts 10:1). He saw clearly, in a vision, an angel of God coming in and saying to him "Cornelius! Your prayers **and your alms have come up for a memorial before God**" (Acts 10:3, 4) and the angel directed him to St. Peter the Apostle and he received the grace of Baptism at St. Peter's hands (Acts chapter 10).

The saints have realised the greatness of this virtue. Job said "I was a father to the poor" (Job 29:16) and the Wise Solomon said "Whoever shuts his ears to the cry of the poor will also cry himself and not be heard" (Proverbs 21:13).

The Lord Jesus made this point clear in the parable of the rich man who in his lifetime received his good things and did not care for Lazarus "who was desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table" (Luke 16:21). When they both died, the former was being tormented in Hades and the latter comforted in the bosom of Abraham. The rich man asked Abraham to send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool his tongue (Luke 19:24). Did this rich man think when he was yet living on earth - that he would later need Lazarus?! Their situation is now reversed. This is what will happen in the life to come. What would he had done if he knew that with a little amount of food given to Lazarus, he would have enjoyed the same comfort in the bosom of Abraham! There were many good people in the bosom of Abraham, but the rich man asked only for Lazarus, the poor man whom he had despised and had shut his ears to his cries!!

This is also what the Lord Jesus made clear in the parable of "The unjust steward" whose wisdom He praised and by which He commanded us saying "Make friends for yourselves by unrighteous mammon" (Luke 16:9). Those friends are the poor people whom we make friends by our giving from the perishing riches. **How great is this virtue which is able to buy eternal canopies!!**

The Lord Jesus teaches us also that when we give a dinner or a supper, not to ask our friends, our brothers, our relatives, nor our rich neighbors; "But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you; for you shall be repaid at the resurrection of the just" (Luke 14:12-14).

No better evidence of the greatness of this virtue and our need to beautify ourselves with it, than what the Lord taught us. Namely, the deeds of mercy and almsgiving are among what qualify us for entering the Kingdom of Heaven. When He pictured the last scene on the frightening day of judgement He praised the righteous saying "Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me ... Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of

these My brethren, you did it to Me" (Matthew 25:31-46).

We have seen that when almsgiving is practised and honored, it becomes an intercession for man and a cause for him to enjoy eternal glory. **The Lord calls the poor "The least of His brethren"** and considers any deed presented to them as if it is presented to Him personally. Have you now seen the superiority of this virtue. Beware, if you are wary about many sides in your spiritual life, but asleep as far as the deeds of mercy and almsgiving are concerned, you will then miss the reward and lose Christ.

Look at your poor brethren with a look full of love and mercy and believe in the promises of God, and you will see Christ in them. Do not be like those wicked people who protested their shortcoming in not showing mercy was because they did not see Jesus Christ hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked ... (Matthew 25:44). **St. John Chrysostom said "The poor stretches his hand to beg but it is God who accepts your alms"**.

The saints understood the superiority of this virtue and its power as they begged others to accept their giving. This is what our teacher St. Paul mentioned about the saintly people in Macedonia **"Imploring us with much urgency that we would receive the gift and the fellowship of the ministering to the saints"** (2 Corinthians 8:4). **You think when you give something to the poor that you do good to him, but in fact he gives you a chance for you to receive a great blessing.** This is what the Macedonians did with St. Paul when they implored him with much urgency to receive their gift, as they realised the great blessings which awaited them.

Know dear brother that the riches of this world, and its legal tender cannot be used in Heaven unless they are exchanged on earth via the poor. Also the eternal canopies in which we will rest are raised by the hands of the poor and the needy.

The Church fathers and its saints who perceived the superiority of this virtue and its ability, and spoke about its greatness and its power:

St. Kebrianos, Bishop and Martyr, a father from the third century said "The Holy Spirit speaks in the Holy Books saying **"In mercy and truth atonement is provided for iniquity"** (Proverbs 16:6)" ... He continues by saying **"As water quenches a blazing fire, so almsgiving atones for sin"** (Sirach 3:30). The matter here becomes evident and clear. The water of the saving waterpot (the Baptism) quenches the blazing fire of hell. Likewise, almsgiving and good deeds put down the fire of iniquities. By Baptism, forgiveness of sins is gifted once for all, and by continuous work without ceasing - like the Baptism - we gain the mercy of God once more.

The Lord teaches that in the Bible. When the Disciples were criticised for eating without first washing their hands, He defended them saying: Did not He who made the outside make the inside also? But rather give alms of such things as you have; then indeed all things are clean to you (Luke 11:40, 41).

The angel Raphael witnesses to that and encourages that almsgiving be done willingly and generously saying: Better prayer with fasting and almsgiving with righteousness ... **because almsgiving preserves a man from death and wipes out all sin** (Tobit 12:8, 9). **He points out**

that our prayers and fasting are less useful unless they are accompanied by almsgiving ... Again, the worry of King Nebuchadnezzar from a troubling dream was tackled by Daniel - to guard him from evil - a remedy by which to obtain divine help saying "Break off your sins by being righteous, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the poor. Perhaps there may be a lengthening of your prosperity" (Daniel 4:27).

St. Basil the Great says "Because you did not have mercy upon others, no mercy is done to you also. Because you shut your door to the poor, God would not open the door of Heaven to you, and because you denied bread to the needy when they asked you, God would deny you the eternal life which you asked for. You will gather what you have planted. If you have planted bitterness, you will gather bitterness. If you have planted cruelty, you will not gather but harsh troubles and great torments. **If you have escaped from doing mercy, mercy will escape from you. If you disliked the poor, He Who became poor in the love of you will dislike you ...**".

St. John Chrysostom says "Let us not put off our lamps, but keep them lit by the works of almsgiving, because this is how the light of this lamp is kept. Let us collect oil in our pots while we are still in this world as we cannot buy it after our departure to that other place. We cannot get it anywhere except from the hands of the poor. Let us collect much of it here if we want to enter the place of the Groom, else we shall remain outside that place. **It is impossible, totally impossible, even if we complete ten thousand good deeds, to enter Heaven without the act of almsgiving**".

Also commenting on the words of the Lord "I desire mercy and not sacrifice" (Hosea 6:6, Matthew 9:13, 12:7), **St. John Chrysostom** says "The Lord prefers mercy to sacrifice for a sound reason. There is the dead slain (the sacrifice) is consumed by fire, ends in ashes and its smoke will mix with the air. But here is nothing like mercy because the fruits it bears are different. The words of Apostle Paul unfolds the treasures of mercy for the poor when he wrote to the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 8:11-15; 9:5-7) ... Let us my beloved, present daily sacrifices on this altar, **because this sacrifice (alms) is greater than prayer, fasting and many other matters ...**".

Again, St. Augustine says "We should not be content with prayer alone but also present almsgiving ... Break your bread to the hungry and accept the poor and the homeless in your home, and if you see a naked person clothe him. By doing that **you pray with confidence and you give your prayer two wings ...**".

St. John El-Tabaisy (El-Assuity) says "**He who loves the poor is like a person who has somebody to intercede for him in the courts, and he who opens his door to the needy holds in his hand the key of the door to God**".

SOME BLESSINGS FROM GIVING ALMS

If the virtue of almsgiving is so great as we mentioned above, no doubt that **God's blessings for the almsgiver are enormous.**

+ We have seen how the deeds of mercy and giving qualify the giver to inherit heaven.

These words concern the believers. But for the nonbeliever, even if he gives all his wealth, he will not be able to buy the kingdom. The Psalmist says "A good man deals graciously and lends; he will guide his affairs with discretion. Surely he will never be shaken; ... **He has dispersed abroad, he has given to the poor; his righteousness endures forever; his horn will be exalted with honor**" (Psalm 112:5-9; 2 Corinthians 9:9).

This matter does not concern the life to come alone, but also concerns our lives here on earth. We know from the Bible and from our own and from general experience that the effect of almsgiving will never fail. It goes beyond the giver to help and support him in times of difficulty. This is **what Solomon the Wise says "Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days"** (Ecclesiastes 11:1).

+ **Almsgiving saves man from evil and sickness.** How great is the Prophet David's saying in this concern: "**Blessed is he who considers the poor; the Lord will deliver him in time of trouble. The Lord will preserve him and keep him alive, and he will be blessed on the earth; You will not deliver him to the will of his enemies. The Lord will strengthen him on his bed of illness; You will sustain him on his sickbed**" (Psalm 41:1-3).

+ **It also delivers from trouble and keeps away the wrath of God.** Mentioned in the book "Paradise of the Monks" is the story of one of the fathers who at a time of famine gave away three loaves of bread, which were all he had. He then expected to die from hunger, as he had obeyed the command with courage. But he heard a voice from heaven announcing to him that because of his giving, the famine will be no more in his life time.

+ **It also saves from sin.** Jesus Ben Sirach says "As water quenches a blazing fire, so **almsgiving atones for sin**" (Sirach 3:30). Mercy to the poor helps to induce God's mercy, as Jesus said "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy" (Matthew 5:7). Since there is no forgiveness without repentance, he who has mercy on others, God has mercy on him by giving him grace to help him to repent and have forgiveness of sins. **The Prophet Daniel said to King Nebuchadnezzar "Break off your sins by being righteous, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the poor. Perhaps there may be a lengthening of your prosperity"** (Daniel 4:27).

St. John Chrysostom said "When you suffer a loss or when you are struck with sadness, sickness, theft, injustice, or one of the severe calamities, give alms and thanks to God who tested you by this temptation, and you will see the abundance of grace which falls upon you from God". **St. Augustine said "As all our sins have been forgiven in the renewing waterpot (Baptism), we shall fall into great difficulties. Almsgiving and prayer purify from the iniquities"**.

+ **It saves even from death** as the righteous Tobit said in his advice to his son Tobias "Almsgiving saves the giver from death and keeps him from going down into darkness" (Tobit 4:10).

Contemporary history tells us an amazing story. In the city of Edfu in Upper Egypt, there was a treasurer who was a very generous almsgiver. He lived a pious holy life, and as a result God blessed every thing he had. He used to care for 400 families. As he grew older and developed an arched back, he refused to go to the church in his private car, but preferred to go there walking, in

spite of the long distance between his house and the church. He used to say "How can I go to the House of the Lord riding my car"?

He became sick and was near death at the age of 90, and the doctors reported that it was his old age, and there was no cure for him. His illness intensified and the doctors told his elder son, who was himself 75 years old, that death was very near. They prepared his death certificate and arranged everything for his funeral. Yet as everyone was expecting his death; yet a miracle happened.

The angel of the Lord appeared to this pious man and told him "Because of your merciful heart and the families which you care for, the Lord granted you 15 more years, the number of years He granted Ezekiel the King of Judah" (2 Kings 20:6). When the elder son went to see his father he found him sitting down and well. His pale face changed to a face in which blood and life flowed. Everyone glorified God and magnified the deed of mercy and the old man actually lived fifteen more years after this incident.

St. John Chrysostom said "A man who is sentenced to die, would he not pay all he has to escape death? Yet you pay nothing to escape the eternal death!".

+ He who gives to the poor and has mercy upon him, neither he nor his descendants will ever be in need, as David said in the Psalm "The wicked borrows and does not repay, but the righteous shows mercy and gives" (Psalm 37:21) ... **"I have been young, and now am old; yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his descendants begging bread. He is ever merciful, and lends; and his descendants are blessed"** (Psalm 37:25, 26). The Wise also said "He who gives to the poor will not lack, but he who hides his eyes will have many curses" (Proverbs 28:27).

+ Among the blessings of giving is the blessing of material riches. The Wise said "Honor the Lord with your possessions, and with the firstfruits of all your increase; So your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will overflow with new wine" (Proverbs 3:9, 10). He also said "He who has a generous eye will be blessed, for he gives of his bread to the poor" (Proverbs 22:9).

Again Malachi said ""Bring all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in My house, and try Me now in this", says the Lord of hosts, "If I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you such blessing that there will not be room enough to receive it. And I will rebuke the devourer for your sakes, so that he will not destroy the fruit of your ground, nor shall the vine fail to bear fruit for you in the field" says the Lord of hosts" (Malachi 3:10, 11).

In fact the reward is of the same kind as the deed "Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you" (Luke 6:38).

A best example is that of **the widow of Zarephath of Sidon, who sheltered Elijah at the time of famine.** This woman benefitted greatly by feeding the man of God (Elijah). The blessing remained in her house until God granted rain again for the land. Moreover, the prophet brought back life to her dead son (1 Kings 17).

St. Augustine describes the hands of the poor as a fertile land which brings forth good fruits. St. Basil the Great says "The good which is done to the relative goes back to its doer. The fruits of the land, and the water of the wells become purer and plentiful the more we draw from them. But if we do not draw water from the wells the water will spoil".

+ **Sufficient is the feeling of inner joy for the giver.** He rescued someone who was in danger, helped someone who had a tragedy, comforted a wretched person, or was the cause of feeding a hungry soul, or bringing happiness to a broken heart. All that brings great joy to the merciful and reflects happiness and delight in his heart. **The philosopher Seneca said "You cannot live happily if you live for yourself only".**

+ From the practical point, he who helps someone in difficulty, will have someone help him when he is in difficulty. He who rescues a needy person or looks at a wretched person, God will provide for him people who will have mercy on him, without him knowing them.

+ **There are many blessings which the Lord promised to those who keep His commandments, among which is the virtue of almsgiving.** See Leviticus 26:3-13 and Deuteronomy 28:1-14.

B) GOD'S COMMANDS ABOUT GIVING

IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Since the time of the written Law, God gave clear commandments concerning almsgiving to the poor and the needy. He said to His people "Six years you shall sow your land and gather in its produce, but the seventh year you **shall let it rest and lie fallow, that the poor of your people may eat**; and what they leave, the beasts of the field may eat. In like manner you shall do with your vineyard and your olive grove" (Exodus 23:10, 11). He also said "If one of your brethren becomes poor, and falls into poverty among you, then you shall help him" (Leviticus 25:35).

In the book of Deuteronomy, it is written "If there is among you a poor man of your brethren, within any of the gates in your land which the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart nor shut your hand from your poor brother, but you shall open your hand wide to him ... You shall surely give to him, and your heart should not be grieved when you give to him, because for this thing the Lord your God will bless you ... ; **therefore I command you, saying, You shall open your hand wide to your brother, to your poor and your needy, in your land**" (Deuteronomy 15:7-11).

In the same book it is written "When you reap your harvest in your field, and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be for the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you beat your olive trees, you shall not go over the boughs again; it shall be for the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not glean it afterward; it shall be for the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow" (Deuteronomy 24:19-21).

The Lord spoke on the tongue of Isaiah about acceptable fasting saying "**Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out; when you see the naked, that you cover him, and not hide yourself from your own flesh?** Then your light shall break forth like the morning, your healing shall spring forth speedily, and your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry, and He will say, "Here I am". If you take away the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness" (Isaiah 58:7-9).

Tobit commanded his son Tobias saying "**Give alms from what you possess and never give with a grudging eye. Do not turn your face away from any poor man, and God will not turn away his face from you. Let your almsgiving match your means ...** you will be laying up a

sound insurance against the day of adversity. **Almsgiving saves the giver from death and keeps him from going down into darkness.** All who give alms are making an offering acceptable to the Most High" (Tobit 4:7-12).

Not only did God give His people these commandments to care for the poor, but also He warned with harsh punishments those who neglect the poor or be unfair to them. It is enough to know that among the causes for which Sodom deserved to be burnt with fire and sulphur, was that it did not strengthen the hand of the poor and needy (Ezekiel 16:49).

God also said by the tongue of the Prophet Moses "You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy, whether one of your brethren or one of the aliens who is in your land within your gates. Each day you shall give him his wages, and not let the sun go down on it, **for he is poor and has set his heart on it; lest he cry out against you to the Lord, and it be sin to you**" (Deuteronomy 24:14, 15). The Prophet David noticed that and said "I know that the Lord will maintain the cause of the afflicted, and justice for the poor" (Psalm 140:12). He also said "He shall regard the prayer of the destitute, and shall not despise their prayer" (Psalm 102:17).

Even more than that, because of the Lord's compassion upon the poor, He made Himself Father to the fatherless and Judge for the widows, caring for them and punishing those who deal unjustly with them, since they have nobody to care for them. The Prophet David said "**A father of the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in His holy habitation**" (Psalm 68:5). He also said "The Lord watches over the strangers; he relieves the fatherless and widow" (Psalm 146:9). Again he said "Lord, You have heard the desire of the humble; you will prepare their heart; you will cause Your ear to hear, to do justice to the fatherless and the oppressed, that the man of the earth may oppress no more" (Psalm 103:17, 18).

Jesus Ben Sirach expressed the same meaning by saying "**Be a father to the orphans and like a husband to their mother; then the Most High will call you his son, and His love for you will be greater than a mother's**" (Sirach 4:10).

John the Baptist, the greatest among those born from women, rebuked the multitudes who came out to be baptized by him as he commanded them to bear fruits worthy of repentance. They asked him "What shall we do then about these fruits"? He answered them saying "He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise" (Luke 3:7-11).

IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The Lord Jesus said much about almsgiving and kindness to the poor: "Sell what you have and give alms; provide yourselves money bags which do not grow old, a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches nor moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Luke 12:33, 34). "**But rather give alms** of such things as you have; then indeed all things are clean to you" (Luke 11:41). "**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. **Therefore be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful**" (Luke 6:35, 36).

After Jesus spoke the parable of the rich man whose ground yielded plentifully and God described him as a fool; said "So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God" (Luke 12:16-21). Also in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus - which we pointed to earlier - the Lord explained that the sin of this rich man was that he "was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day", meanwhile he ignored the poor beggar Lazarus, full of sores, who was laid at his gate, desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table" (Luke 16:19-31). St. Luke who recorded this parable in his Epistle introduced it by saying "Now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, also heard all these things, and they derided Him. And He said to them ..." (Luke 16:14, 15).

The teachings of Christ about almsgiving reflected on His Disciples and Apostles. **That was clear from their writings. Apostle Paul said** in his farewell speech to the priests of Ephesus "And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, **"It is more blessed to give than to receive"**" (Acts 20:35). He wrote to Timothy saying "Command those who are rich in this present age ... **that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share, storing up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life"** (1 Timothy 6:17-19).

At the end of his Epistle to the Hebrews, St. Paul told them "Let brotherly love continue. Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some have unwittingly entertained angels. Remember the prisoners as if chained with them-- those who are mistreated-- since you yourselves are in the body also" (Hebrews 13:1-3).

Undoubtedly, brotherly love is not evident without good works. Among these are the deeds of mercy, which the Apostle mentioned, such as entertaining strangers. He also urged the believers to remember the prisoners and the mistreated. To show that he wanted to beseech the believers to the deeds of mercy, he continued by saying **"Let your conduct be without covetousness"** (Hebrews 13:5).

Apostle James elaborated, marvellously, on the deeds of mercy. He summarised that in his saying "Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world" (James 1:27). Notice that he put the deeds of mercy before keeping oneself unspotted! The same Apostle was displeased with those he wrote his Epistle to, because they had dishonored the poor (James 2:6).

ALMSGIVING IN THE EARLY CHURCH

The belief in our Lord Jesus Christ and the filling with His Holy Spirit made the believers feel that "they were of one heart and one soul" (Acts 4:32) and that they were members together in a chosen brotherhood, even members of one body. Hence it was not strange that they sensed the needs of one another. Thus, it was fair that the surplus of some would be moved to fill the needs of others "Neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common" (Acts 4:32).

The writer of the book of Acts described the Church at that time by saying "And great grace was upon them all. Nor was there anyone among them who lacked; for all who

were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, and laid them at the apostles' feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need" (Acts 4:33-35). See also (Acts 2:44, 45).

As the number of believers increased and the amount of donations and contributions increased, the Apostles found that it was not desirable that they should leave the word of God and serve tables. They then searched for a special class of ministers (the Deacons) and appointed them over this business; so that nobody would be neglected in the daily distribution (Acts 6:1-8). **Almsgiving was thus evident in the Church of Christ since its establishment, as an essential command in its ministry.** No student of the history of the Church can ignore the effect of almsgiving on the Church in its early stage.

In his missionary trips, St. Paul cared for servicing the poor. He said in his epistle to the Galatians "They desired only that we should remember the poor, the very thing which I also was eager to do" (Galatians 2:10). When St. Paul was arrested in the city of Caesarea, he stood up to defend himself in front of the ruler saying "Now after many years I came to bring alms and offerings to my nation" (Acts 24:17). In his Epistle to the Hebrews, after speaking about prayer and praise, he proceeded by reminding them about the works of mercy saying "But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased" (Hebrews 13:16). See also (Philippians 4:17-19).

WHO ARE ASKED TO GIVE ALMS

Not only the rich people are asked to give alms but everyone, without distinction, even the clergy who accept giving from the people. The Apostle says "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith" (Galatians 6:10). In another place he says about the Christians in Macedonia "Moreover, brethren, we make known to you the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia: **that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded in the riches of their liberality. For I bear witness that according to their ability, yes, and beyond their ability, they were freely willing**" (2 Corinthians 8:1-3). In spite of their deep poverty they abounded in the riches of their liberality.

Among the best examples about almsgiving which the Bible recorded is that of the poor widow who gave two mites - her whole livelihood. The Lord praised her and said that she gave more than all those rich people who have given to the treasury; for she out of her poverty put in all that she had (Mark 12:41-44).

St. John Chrysostom says "The talk about almsgiving, dear brethren, does not only concern the rich and great people, but also the poor and the needy, because in it there is great benefit and there is salvation to all. If anyone depends on begging in his life, to him the talk about almsgiving is aimed and well suited. This teaches us that there does not exist a poor or a needy person as such that he does not even have the equivalent of two mites!"

C) HOW DO WE PRESENT OUR OFFERINGS?

When the Lord Jesus sat opposite the treasury in the temple, He saw **how** the people put money into the treasury (Mark 12:41). **God does not care for the quantity of what we give nor to its kind, but He cares more about our feeling as we present our offerings and give our alms. Abel and Cain brought sacrifices to God and the Lord respected Abel and his offering, but not Cain and his offering** (Genesis 4:4, 5). **It is clear then that God looks at the giver before He looks at the gift itself!**

We spoke about this point in length in the subject of "**How**" in this book. **We come back here and ask ourselves "How do we present our offerings?"**

(1) AS PAY BACK TO A DEBT:

When we present our giving to God we should not feel that we are doing a favour, but rather that we give Him a portion of what He gave us. After he collected lots of gold and silver to build a house for God, David said "**For all things come from You, and of Your own we have given You**" (1 Chronicles 29:14). Let us remember that we are paying back to the Lord a debt hanging from our necks -only a small part of this debt. **God has given us the whole, should we not give Him a part from this whole?**

The gifts of God do not concern material things only, but extend to what is more superior - the great salvation, which the Only Begotten Son of God gave us, when He gave Himself a sacrificial atonement on our behalf "Knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot" (1 Peter 1:18, 19).

When St. Paul spoke about the giving of the Macedonians, he attracted their attention to the great gift of God - to the huge humility of Christ and to His generosity, in front of which diminishes the giving of the Macedonians "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9) .

Not only we should give our alms to God but also beseech Him to accept them. **When the poor accepts your alms he has done you good.** Our teacher St. Paul expressed that by saying "For

it pleased those from Macedonia and Achaia to make a certain contribution for the poor among the saints who are in Jerusalem ... Now I beg you, brethren, through the Lord Jesus Christ, and through the love of the Spirit, that you strive together with me in prayers to God for me, ... **that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints**" (Romans 15:26-31).

(2) WITH SPIRIT OF LOVE:

Love in every matter, in every virtue, and in every practice is like the soul to the body. If the soul leaves the body, it would immediately die and soon rot. **Likewise any virtue without the spirit of love is rejected by God.** Christianity lifts up our compassion and we sense the feelings of others "Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep" (Romans 12:15). It is said about the Lord that "He sympathizes with our weaknesses" (Hebrews 4:15).

The believer whose life is empty of brotherly love affirms that he is not a disciple of the Lord, Who said: "By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). You do not love your brother when you see him in need and can help him, but shut up your heart from him **"But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth"** (1 John 3:17, 18).

We should imitate our Heavenly Father Who in the past made for our first parents Adam and Eve tunics of skin, and clothed them after they were naked from the clothes of grace (Genesis 3:21). Accentuates that is the saying of our teacher St. Paul: **"And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing"** (1 Corinthians 13:3).

We mentioned earlier that for a noble holy purpose, the Lord permitted material differences between people, so as to give them opportunities to practice and possess virtues. No doubt that love is in the forefront of the virtues which He wants us to possess and hold. When I look with love at my poor brethren I move with compassion towards them. In this case I do not see them as poor but as brethren and love ties us together. The Apostle calls love "the bond of perfection" (Colossians 3:14).

Concerning the almsgiving which we present to the Lord, it is clear that if it does not come out from a heart full of love, it is rejected **"If a man would give for love all the wealth of his house, it would be utterly despised"** (Songs 8:7).

(3) WILLINGLY:

Giving should not be as a result of shyness, after insistence, or for the sake of a certain person, but should be willingly ... **"not grudgingly or of necessity"** (2 Corinthians 9:7). The Apostle witness to the Macedonians that they gave **"freely and willingly"** (2 Corinthians 8:3)

(4) WITH SELF-DENIAL

The Lord Jesus stressed upon this point, since self appearance was an ailment for the Jews at that time. It is the love of showing off, self glory and the praises from others. The principle of self denial is an important principle which the Lord God cared to teach and which the early Christians followed. Our teacher St. Paul asserts this principle in general, in the minds of the Colossians, by saying **"And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance"** (Colossians 3:23, 24).

Concerning giving and alms, the Lord Jesus said "Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven. Therefore, when you do a charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory from men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. **But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, that your charitable deed may be in secret;** and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly" (Matthew 6:1-4).

The command of the Lord "Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing" shows His desire that our giving be with self denial. It does not mean that nobody should see us. Even if everyone saw us and we do not mean to show off or wait for the praises from others, our giving is still acceptable by the Lord.

St. John Chrysostom says "When you give alms and do not wish to show that to others, do not worry. Nobody is going to see you even if all the world praises you, because you did not do it for vain glory. The Lord did not only say: "Do not do your charitable deeds before men" (Matthew 6:1), but also said not to show off in front of men (Matthew 6:2).

(5) GENEROUSLY ACCORDING TO YOUR ABILITY:

If we are the children of God, let us imitate our Heavenly Father about whom is said: **"Who gives to all liberally and without reproach"** (James 1:5). In the past the Lord commanded His people saying "Then you shall keep the Feast of Weeks to the Lord your God **with the tribute of a freewill offering from your hand, which you shall give as the Lord your God blesses you"** (Deuteronomy 16:10).

St. Paul spoke frequently about this point. He said in a command to his Disciple Timothy: "Command those who are rich in this present age ... to do good, that they be rich in good works, **ready to give, willing to share"** (1 Timothy 6:17, 18), and said to the Romans **"He who gives, with liberality ..."** (Romans 12:8). He also said to the Corinthians about the believers in Macedonia "Moreover, brethren, we make known to you the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia: that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded **in the riches of their liberality. For I bear witness that according to their**

ability, yes, and beyond their ability, they were freely willing, imploring us with much urgency that we would receive the gift and the fellowship of the ministering to the saints. And not only as we had hoped, **but they first gave themselves to the Lord**, and then to us by the will of God" (2 Corinthians 8:1-5).

Beside what the Apostle said in those verses about the generosity in giving, **he disclosed the secret of this generosity in his words "but they first gave themselves to the Lord"**. This is the secret of generosity. **Does a person who gives his whole self to God care for trivial material matters!**. Is it hard and difficult for a person who gives everything - i.e. himself - to give material things?

We notice this phenomena clearly in the lives of the believers and of the Church. The person who has actually given himself to God - and I do not mean in name only - is generous with his money, time and effort. There are some people who give relatively many things in the open - for one purpose or the other - but in reality, their heart is not straight or ordained, as for example, Ananias and his wife Sapphira (Acts chapter 5).

We come back to the point of generosity in giving and say that it was a characteristic in the early Church. After St. Paul said his previous phrase, he continues by saying **"He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully"** (2 Corinthians 9:6).

St. Kebrianos the Bishop and martyr after reviewing the story of the poor widow who threw two mites in the treasury and the Lord praised her, says: **"Blessed greatly and honored is that woman who deserved - even before the day of judgement - to be praised by the Judge! Let the rich people be ashamed of their meanness and their lack of faith. The woman who was really in need, was found rich in her deeds.** In spite of the fact that whatever collected is to be distributed among the widows and the orphans, she gave from what she should take".

(6) JOYFULLY AND HAPPILY:

Joy indicates good will and a kind nature and what is in the heart from brotherly love. The Apostle says "So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; **for God loves a cheerful giver"** (2 Corinthians 9:7).

St. John Chrysostom after he reviewed the story of the invitation of our Father Abraham to the three men (Genesis 18:1-8), says "We are surprised at the deed of the father of fathers Abraham who had three hundred and eighteen servants. He did not command any of them to fetch a calf from the herd, but he himself went and served the guests. He was old and thin, but he ran and got the calf. Hence do not be ashamed or shy as a respectable person to serve the poor by your hands. If the Lord Jesus, your Creator is not shy to extend His hands and receive the alms given to the poor, how can you, a speaking animal be shy to extend your hand and give Him some silver or a piece of bread. **We should be ready to serve the poor and comfort them; our hands are sanctified by serving them. If we pray about that, the Good Lord will be gracious and give us the desire of our hearts"**.

We wish here to refer to a kind of people who after giving alms to the poor or to a beggar, they rebuke him. St. James the Apostle says to those people "But you have dishonored the poor man" (James 2:6). **St. John Chrysostom says** "The great man and the generous man is he who has mercy. He does good cheerfully and eagerly without frowning or sorrow. He does not get joy from giving unless he is well convinced that he is not giving but taking. He considers himself the winner and the giving is for him and what he has given is not a loss".

(7) FROM HONEST EARNING:

Chapter 15 of the Church laws indicates that the Church does not accept the offerings of wicked people or the unbelievers. If the Church is obliged to accept such offerings, she buys with them wood or material for burning, signifying that such giving deserve to be burnt. It is a great offense against God that we present to Him offerings from illegal earning or an earning resulting from evil doing, such as the money of adulterers for example. David the Prophet said: "**The oil of the wicked does not anoint my head**". Likewise, the giving of the wicked is not accepted by the Church.

The Lord said in the past by Malachi the Prophet "You say, In what way have we despised Your name? ... And when you offer the blind as a sacrifice, is it not evil? And when you offer the lame and sick, is it not evil? Offer it then to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you favorably? ... I have no pleasure in you, says the Lord of hosts, Nor will I accept an offering from your hands" (Malachi 1:6-10)

St. John Chrysostom, after he spoke about almsgiving, and showed us that it is greater than prayer, fasting and many other matters, said "On condition that it is from honest earning and real toil. It should be earned without greed, snatching or violence. The unclean offerings offend God more than please Him. We should then be very careful to serve Him, not to offend Him. Because Cain did not bring the best offering from what he had, he received a big punishment. What would happen to us if we present something which we obtained by greed or violence?!"

St. Augustine commenting on the saying of the Lord "Make friends for yourselves by unrighteous mammon" (Luke 16:9), says "Give alms from your honest work. Give from what you have owned by righteousness, because you cannot give a bribe to Christ your Judge. He will not listen to you concerning the poor whom you were entrusted on His behalf".

D) TITHES

ERA BEFORE THE LAW:

The subject of the tithes is an old one, no one knows its origin. Men of God used to practice it, even before the era of the Law. We read about Abraham - who lived before Moses - that when he returned from defeating his enemies the kings **"And he gave a tithe of all to Melchizedek king of Salem the priest of God Most High, who blessed Abraham"** (Genesis 14:19, 20). We notice that Abraham presented his tithes to Melchizedek as the priest of God Most High and not as a friend. St Paul mentioned this event in his Epistle to the Hebrews, and he meant to prove the superiority of Melchizedek Priesthood over the Levite Priesthood "Here mortal men (he means the Levites) receive tithes, but there he receives them, of whom it is witnessed that he lives (that is Christ)" See (Hebrews 7:1-10).

Jacob the father of the Tribes also - who lived before Moses -after he saw the vision (of the ladder set up on the earth and its top reached to heaven) and after God blessed him and removed his fear, he made a vow, saying: **"If God will be with me, and keep me in this way that I am going, ... , and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You"** (Genesis 28:20-22).

ERA OF THE LAW:

When the era of the Law came, giving tithes appeared as a commandment in the laws of Moses. The Lord commanded His people to tithe all their incomes "You shall truly tithe all the increase of your grain that the field produces year by year. ..., the tithe of your grain and your new wine and your oil, of the firstborn of your herds and your flocks, that you may learn to fear the Lord your God always" (Deuteronomy 14:22, 23).

Tithes in this form was for honoring God. The children of Israel realise that God is the owner of the land, and the giver of all its fruits and products. They are those who rented and cultivated it. For this reason, they had to give Him thanks and honor for all His blessings.

The Wise said "Honor the Lord with your possessions, and with the firstfruits of all your increase; So your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will overflow with new wine" (Proverbs 3:9, 10).

We read in the Old Testament about more than one kind of tithes:

(1) The first tithe which the Law demanded from the Jews, is for God **"It is holy to the Lord"** (Leviticus 27:30). This kind of tithe is not to be redeemed, changed or exchanged. If a man wants at all to redeem any of this tithe, he shall add one-fifth to it, and if he wants to exchange it; and if he exchanges it at all, then both it and the one exchanged for it shall be holy; it shall not be redeemed (Leviticus 27:30).

It seems that the Law specified that this tithe which is for God, was to be given to the Levites (the servants of God) who had no inheritance in their land, like their brothers. The Lord said to Aaron: "You shall have no inheritance in their land, nor shall you have any portion among them;

I am your portion and your inheritance among the children of Israel. Behold, I have given the children of Levi all the tithes in Israel as an inheritance in return for the work which they perform, the work of the tabernacle of meeting, ... for the tithes of the children of Israel, which they offer up as a heave offering to the Lord, I have given to the Levites as an inheritance; therefore I have said to them, "Among the children of Israel they shall have no inheritance"" (Numbers 18:20, 21, 24).

(2) **A tithe** for the celebration of the feasts and the jubilees and may be redeemed or exchanged for money (Deuteronomy 14:22-27).

(3) **A tithe** once every three years for the stranger and the fatherless and the widow (Deuteronomy 14:28, 29).

(4) **A tithe for the House of the Lord.** See (Deuteronomy 12:5, 6, 11; Nehemiah 10:32, 37, 38; 13:11, 12; Amos 4:4; Malachi 3:10). When God organized the regular worship for the Jews, such worship required huge expenses, which is to be paid from the tithes. For this the Lord said in Malachi 3:10: "Bring all the tithes into the storehouse (the storehouse of the House of the Lord), that there may be food in My house". That is food for the Priests, the Levites and the servants of the House of God.

We read about Nehemiah that he demanded from the Jews to bring their tithes, offerings, vows and other offerings to the House of God. These offerings were neglected by the people for a long time (Nehemiah 13:11).

After learning about God's commandments for bringing the tithes, we read about His promises and blessings for those who offer them. Truly we cannot find in the promises and blessings of God to man in the Holy Bible, stronger than the promises and blessings for offering the tithes. In such promises, God puts Himself under test and trial "Bring all the tithes ... and try Me now in this, says the Lord of hosts, If I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you such blessing that there will not be room enough to receive it" (Malachi 3:10).

Though it is said "You shall not tempt the Lord your God" (Deuteronomy 6:16; Matthew 4:7), in this situation God says "**try Me**". After that do we doubt the faithfulness of God and does this matter require us to put God under test and trial. No doubt, this phrase does not mean proving the faithfulness of God, but rather to affirm our own trust in the promises of God "I will pour out for you such blessing that there will not be room enough to receive it", "I will open for you the windows of heaven". In the past at the time of Noah, God opened the windows of heaven and drowned the world. How much would the blessings of God be if He opens the windows of heaven for the purpose of blessing the giver?!

Then the Lord adds to His promises for fulfilling the tithes commandment and says "And I will rebuke the devourer for your sakes, so that he will not destroy the fruit of your ground, nor shall the vine fail to bear fruit for you in the field, says the Lord of hosts; And all nations will call you blessed, for you will be a delightful land, says the Lord of hosts" (Malachi 3:11, 12).

The matter does not only concern the positive side; the blessing, **but there is a curse upon those who refuse to give their tithes, whom the Lord call His robbers.** The Lord says in astonishment "Will a man rob God? Yet you have robbed Me! **But you say, In what way have we robbed You? In tithes and offerings.** You are cursed with a curse, for you have robbed Me" (Malachi 3:8, 9).

IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The Lord proclaimed that He did not come to destroy the Law but to fulfil it (Matthew 5:17). **The commandment of the tithes was not abolished in the New Testament, in the sense that it was not a symbol for something in the New Testament.** It is - as we mentioned - for thanking God and His generosity, and thus it has to stay and continue. It should even appear in a more noble way in the shadow of the blessings of the New Testament.

What the Lord Jesus said about the tithes indicates that He supports it. He said "Woe to you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For **you pay tithe** of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. **These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone**" (Matthew 23:23, Luke 11:42). This concerns tithes in general. **Yet the Lord Jesus declared "that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven"** (Matthew 5:20).

Giving tithes were among the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees, by which they were showing off. The Lord mentioned the Pharisee who went to the temple to pray and mention his righteousness to God "I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess" (Luke 18:12). The Gospel writer St. Luke who wrote this parable introduced it by saying "He (Jesus) spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous" (Luke 18:9).

The Lord thus explained the principle of giving in the New Testament. The tithe is a lower limit and may go up to **selling every thing and giving Him alms "Sell what you have and give alms"** (Luke 12:33), **"Give alms of such things as you have;** then indeed all things are clean to you" (Luke 11:41).

The Apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ pointed out in the "Decoulia" (Apostle Laws) to what the Law in the Old Testament demanded concerning giving. They confirmed it and made it a duty for the Christians by saying "All what was said in the past, this keep also: **the tithes,** the firstfruits of our labours, and the tithes of salvation which was devoted from the past to Jesus Christ - the True High Priest - Whose name begins with **"ten"** (the first letter in Jesus' name in the Greek language is the Youta which equals ten), and His ministers". **The Apostles laws pointed out the tithes and firstfruits of the harvests** which are presented according to His command, and to be dispensed with by the Bishop as the man of God". See the seventh book, chapter 30 and the eighth book, chapter 30, which concerns dispensing with the tithes. Hence the Church kept the principle of the tithe as a lower limit.

It is true that we do not read in the New Testament about a definite system for giving, as if giving is a freewill action or arbitrary, and no definite amounts are set to be given to the Church such as the tithes in the Old Testament. This is clarified from the story of Ananias and his wife Sapphira "While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control?" (Acts 5:4). Their action was without any compelling or obligation. **Yet the obligation results from the inner feeling.**

When our teacher the Apostle Paul asked the Church in Corinth to share in the needs of the saints of Jerusalem, he was careful to move them through their consciences, not as an order but simply asking them for help. That is for them to verify the sincerity of their love (1 Corinthians 16:1-3). This was the principle upon which the early Church acted "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35).

We now wish to present the sayings of some of the Church fathers in its early centuries about giving and tithes:

In the first century: We do not find any reference for paying the tithes. Yet some people were selling all their possession and presented the proceeds to the Apostles who distributed them to the needy, "and the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common. ... **Nor was there anyone among them who lacked; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, and laid them at the Apostles' feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need"** (Acts 4:32-35).

When there was collection in Antioch to send a relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea, they paid "**each according to his ability**" (Acts 11:29).

In the Churches of Galatia and Corinth, the Apostle commanded that each one gives "**as he may prosper**" (1 Corinthians 16:1, 2). Again in his two Epistles to Timothy, the Apostle Paul did not mention anything about tithes or any definite percentage when he dealt with the subject of giving.

In the second century: Faith, love and generosity in giving continued. The believers felt that setting a percentage to giving would limit the free spirit of Christian love.

St. Erinaous, from the fathers of this century says "Our Lord came to continue and to expand the Law. He replaced explicit laws by principles. Instead of "do not commit adultery" there is "do not covet", instead of "do not kill" there is "put off anger", **and instead of paying the tithes, one may distribute all his riches to the poor.** This is how the Lord freed us from all ties of slavery".

St. Erinaous again compares between the enslavement of Moses' Law and the freeing of Christian sonship. He says "**For this reason, while they (the Jews) regarded the tithes of their possessions be specified to God, on the contrary of that, those who received the freedom made**

servicing God as their wealth, with joy and liberty, not giving less, but according to their great belief"

In the third century: The scholar Origen in his defence for offering the firstfruits, also mentioned the tithes, not as a duty for the Christians but as a lower limit over which **the Christians** should pay.

First Origen stated what is written in the Bible "Woe to you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithes of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone" (Matthew 23:23). Then he said "If you say that the Lord Jesus said these words to the Pharisees and not to His Disciples, listen to what He said to His disciples "Unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven"" (Matthew 5:20).

Hence what Jesus wants the Pharisees to do, He wants the Disciples to do and to surpass. And what He did not wish the disciples to do, He did not command even the Pharisees to do. How then would our righteousness exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees, if they cannot taste the fruits of their lands before presenting their firstfruits to the priests, and portion their tithes to the Levites. As for me, if I do not do likewise, I misuse the fruits of the land, particularly as the priests know nothing about them, the Levites are ignorant of them, and the Holy Altar does not see them!". This was recorded in Origen's sermon number 11 about the book of Numbers.

St. Kebrianos mourning over the decrease in offering the almsgiving said: "They (the early Christians) used to sell houses and possessions, but we do not pay from our inheritance, even the tithes. The Lord commands us to sell, but instead we expand and prosper".

In the fourth century: St. Ambros said in his Sermon number 34 "God has kept the tithe for Himself, and no one has the right to keep what the Lord has kept for Himself. He gave you nine parts and kept for Himself the tenth part. If you are not going to give God the tenth part, He will take the nine parts from you". He also said in a sermon on the Ascension day "A good Christian pays his tithes yearly, so they may be given to the poor".

St. John Chrysostom: In his 4th Sermon on chapter 2 of the Epistle to the Ephesians said "The Jews used to pay the tithes, but now it is surprising to hear that someone is paying his tithes! This is shameful! If it is dangerous to neglect the tithes in the shadow of the Law, how much more dangerous it is now?".

In the fifth century: St. Eronios in explaining Chapter 3 of Malachi, said "What we said about the tithes and the firstfruits of the land which from the past used to be given from the people to the priests and the Levites, that was followed by the people of the Church who were commanded to sell all they had, give to the poor and follow the Lord. If we are not prepared to do that, we should at least follow the early teachings of the Jews and give a portion of the whole to the poor and

give due respect to the priests and Levites. If someone does not accept that, he is accused of stealing and deceiving God.

St. Augustine in explaining Psalm 146 said: "First separate a part and make a certain percentage, specify a good portion of your income. Do you pay the tithes? Separate the tithe, though it may be very small". In his sermon number 48, after he mentioned that the increasing taxes in his time was imposed on the people because they do not give God what is His, said "Almsgiving should be paid according to the measure and quantity as specified in (Tobit 4:8) "Let your almsgiving match your means. If you have little, do not be ashamed to give the little you can afford".

Now after we reviewed some of the sayings of the Church fathers in the first five centuries of Christianity, about giving, we say that the Lord Jesus teaches us that we should give more than the tithe, which is the specified limit in the Law of the Old Testament. It is supposed in the Testament of Grace, that our righteousness exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 5:20). Christianity which presents to us love in its superb form, demands us to give according to our means, as a means of expressing love. Yet because of diminished love and weak faith, we have no choice but to ask for the tithe as a lower limit and no less.

E) SOME OBJECTIONS AGAINST GIVING

Some people refuse to give the tithes of their incomes to the Lord - although it is the lowest limit of giving - **arguing that they have too many financial expenses and say:** "what is needed for the home is denied to the Church".

A second group of people shy from giving alms in order to save for the future. They say that life's circumstances require it, and one cannot trust the future.

There is a third group who do not really like giving, and if they do, it will be a trivial quantity not proportional to their income. For them it is enough to put few pennies in the Church collection plate, while their tithes are much more than that. The argument of this group is aimed against some of the clergy and their behaviour towards money. If they are asked "why do you not give to the poor?", they answer that all or most of them pretend to be poor while they are professional beggars.

THE FIRST OBJECTION:

There are many financial expenses in life: We reply by enumerating the many and wonderful promises of God for generous givers, which we mentioned earlier. If God has promised that for the sake of a cup of cold water, one shall by no means lose his reward (Matthew 10:42; Mark 9:41), how much would the reward be for him who feeds and clothes the Lord in the person of the hungry and the naked! **The problem of our era is faith. People love by their minds only, without giving faith a chance to work in them.**

A man who dispenses his monthly salary with no portion of it to God, makes a big mistake,

as many people do. **Their giving may be out of their abundance, not from their livelihood.** The Lord praised the poor widow who put two mites in the treasury **"for they all put in out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put"** (Mark 12:44). We know that the Lord Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, and should deal with Him accordingly. **That is to make the Lord number one in our giving,** and in everything.

In this respect we should remember the words of the man of God Elijah to the widow of Zarephath of Sidon at the time of famine. She apologized that she could not give him a morsel of bread by saying "I have only a handful of flour in a bin, and a little oil in a jar, and I may go in and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die". But Elijah's answer was **"Do not fear; go and do as you have said, but make me a small cake from it first, and afterward make some for yourself and your son"** (1 Kings 17:11-13). **That is Elijah, man of God first, then she and her son last, the Lord first then you and your children last.**

This is the secret of the blessing; God first. This is exactly what happened; the bin of flour was not used up, nor did the jar of oil run dry (1 Kings 17:14) until God granted rain again for the land. The man of God Elijah was not selfish to ask for himself first, but he was sure of the blessings of the Lord which was going to descent on this widow as a result of her deed. We should not forget that when the widow honored Elijah and was hospitable to him, that was not for him as much as was for God Himself, whose servant was Elijah "who honors you honors Me".

THE SECOND OBJECTION (SAVING):

We mentioned that a group of people do not offer alms in order to save for the future and life's unexpected circumstances. **We wish to present the proper view concerning saving.** To do that, let us **define two main kinds of savings:**

(1) Saving by just collecting money: when someone saves whatever remains from his needs without any necessity or cause for spending it in the future. **Christianity forbids this kind of saving and considers it as love of money.** "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth" (Matthew 6:19) applies to that.

(2) There is another kind which we may also call saving, which is saving certain amounts of money for spending them in one lot for a basic, important and necessary purpose. From the technical point, such a person is saving money, but from the real practical point, this money is not being saved, but it is spent before collecting it, since it awaits to be spent. **This saving is permitted by Christianity, because it is not love of money or laying up treasures.**

As an example is the father who saves money to pay it in one lot for his children's education at the beginning of the year. Another example is the father who saves some money for the wedding of his daughter. He is not laying up treasures, as in most cases he spends this saved money and puts himself in debt to pay the rest of the bills. **It is proper for the Christian to prepare himself for certain occasions and saves for them, provided it is not without faith and trust in God, and his saving does not contradict Christian love which necessitates that he does not neglect the needs and feelings of his brethren. He should also be honest in presenting his giving to God, which is the tithes as a lower limit.**

We summarise that there is no objection in such cases for saving money, provided that it is not for the love of money itself, but for meeting necessary expenses, and not for unnecessary matters and also not on the expense of our obligation towards God. It should not also conflict with our trust in God and His care for us and our children. The Lord Jesus commanded us saying: "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things" (Matthew 6:34).

St. Kebrianos the bishop and martyr said "Give to God your wealth which you keep as an inheritance for your descendants. Make Him the guardian for your children. Make Him their Lord and keeper by His Holy Majesty against all evils in the world".

Concerning the third kind of objection against giving, we have already dealt with when we discussed the subject about to whom we should give our offerings.

F) EXAMPLES OF GENEROUS GIVERS

The Holy Bible gave us examples of many of God's people who loved the Lord and hence loved doing mercy with their giving. **Among those are Job the righteous** who used to be "the greatest of all the people of the East" (Job 1:3). In spite of his riches, he was merciful. We find that from his sayings: "Because I delivered the poor who cried out, the fatherless and he who had no helper. The blessing of a perishing man came upon me, and I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy. I was eyes to the blind, and I was feet to the lame. I was a father to the poor, ..." (Job 29:12-15). If I have kept the poor from their desire, or caused the eyes of the widow to fail, or eaten my morsel by myself, so that the fatherless may not eat of it ... If I have seen anyone perish for lack of clothing, or any poor man without covering; ... Then let my arm fall from my shoulder, let my arm be torn from the socket" (Job 31:16-22).

There was another personality in the Apostolic time. She was Tabitha about which the Bible said "This woman was full of good works and charitable deeds". Her merciful deeds which interceded for her, and St. Peter raised her after she died" (Acts 9:36-41)

The Church history is also full of merciful personalities, who pleased God by their good deeds. We only speak about three of them; two lay people and a clergy:

1. ST. PETER THE WORSHIPPER:

He started his life as a tax collector, harsh in his dealings, and extreme miser and mean. People called him the merciless. One day a poor man came asking him for an alms, and he refused

him. But this poor continued asking him. It happened that the servant of the rich man arrived carrying loaves of bread. So he took one loaf and threw it in the face of the poor, aiming to hit him. But the poor person bent down, got the bread and went away.

The Lord wanted to change the heart of this rich man and to destroy the idol which he had in his heart. That night, he saw a dream, as if it was the day of judgement and he was standing in front of the angels. **He had no good deeds except the loaf of bread with which he had hit the poor man.** He woke up terrified from his dream and kept thinking and blaming himself for his ruthlessness.

This was how his meanness and nastiness changed to a great mercy, **to the extent that after he distributed all his wealth to the poor, he did not find anything else to give except his robe. So he sold it and gave its price alms to the poor.** It was said that when he did not find anything else in his ownership in his town, he left it, sold himself as a slave and gave the price to the poor.

When the news of his virtues spread, he went to the Sheheit Desert and spent the rest of his life in ascetic worshipping. He deserved to know the time of his departure from this world. The Coptic Church celebrates his feast on 25 Tobah, 2 February, every year.

2. MOALEM IBRAHIM EL-GOHARY:

He was a high level public servant when the Turks and Mummeluk governed Egypt. Yet he was an extremely humble and loving person. **He was distinguished by his mercy and his almsgiving.** It was said that he used to divide his income into three parts. Two thirds went to the poor, for writing religious books, rebuilding demolished churches and monasteries, buying properties and awarding their ownerships to the Churches and monasteries. He used to send regular offerings yearly to the monasteries.

Concerning mercy and his love to giving, he was fulfilling the command of his Lord "Give to everyone who asks of you" (Luke 6:30), especially those who asked him in the Name of Christ. Yet in his dealings he did not distinguish between Christians and non-Christians.

Once, a poor man wanted to test his known generosity. He followed him in his way to work asking for an alms in the name of Christ. Moalem Ibrahim gave him. After taking the alms, the man went to another street intersecting him asking for alms in a way to show that he is the same person who took from him before. Moalem Ibrahim still gave him. **This repeated 18 times,** and Moalem Ibrahim gave him alms each time and was not irritated from the poor man. At the end the poor man was so amazed and cried out saying to him "Ibrahim, blessed are you, the Lord be with you". **He replied in a humble way saying "Do not be surprised, you ask me for money for which I am steward and the steward should not worry!"**

He used to feed the poor in the churches. One day in the church of St. Barbara in Old Cairo, he saw that the people in charge did not do their duty properly. He rebuked them saying "Do not break the hearts of the weak poor, be nice to them. The Lord commanded us to be hospitable to

those who could not repay us".

He was even an almsgiver from his grave!. It happened that a poor man came searching for Moalem Ibrahim at his house after he died. When they told him that he had died and directed him to his grave, the man went there and sat down crying until he slept. He saw Moalem Ibrahim in a dream telling him "Do not cry, there is a person, the owner of such shop owed me a certain amount of money. Go to him and ask him for this money". This dream repeated three times. Yet because of the repetition of the dream, the poor man in a timid way went and stood in front of the shop of this person. When the owner of the shop heard the story of the dream, he gave the man the money which he owed Moalem Ibrahim and praised God.

It happened also after his death that some evil people falsely reported to the ruler that his daughter, called Demiana, had the wealth of her father. Since the country's economy was extremely bad the ruler called the daughter to investigate the matter. The daughter did not object and asked for few days to bring the wealth of her father. After a few days she went to the ruler and took with her the poor and needy people whom her father used to help. They formed a huge crowd! **She said to the ruler "The wealth of my father is kept in the bellies of those" and she pointed to the crowd.** When the ruler knew the truth, he let her go and remembered the good deeds of her father.

This is a side of the life of the righteous giver Moalem Ibrahim El-Gohary who slept in the Lord in 1795. He was remembered by Bishop Yousab of Girga in 1796, in an emotional word saying "Priests and ministers, gather together, dress in sacks and remember him who used to revisit the churches with his offerings and oblations ...".

3. ANBA ABRAAM LATE BISHOP OF FAYOUM:

A famous man, the saint of the twentieth century, good shepherd and maker of miracles. **This man had a personality with many facets, the one which distinguished him is his mercy and his almsgiving,** in any job he had.

When he was appointed a deputy bishop in the city of Minya, he converted the place to a shelter for the strangers, orphans, and for the fatherless and the poor.

When he was the head of El-Moharak monastery, he opened he doors of the monastery to the poor, the needy and the widows. Satan moved some of the monks against him and cried the old cry which Juda Escariot previously cried "what a waste?!". They accused him of wasting the resources of the monastery!. They persisted until he was fired as the head of the monastery and they dismissed the poor whom he took care of.

When he was ordained Bishop of Fayoum, he excelled in doing mercy to the extent that he gave everything he owned. One day a penniless man came to ask him for money to spend on his wife who gave birth to a baby. The Bishop gave him one pound, all he had at that moment. When the poor man went out, he was met by the deputy of the Bishop who knew that he had received a pound. The deputy took the pound from him and replaced it by a fifth of a pound. The poor man returned to the Bishop and told him what happened. The Bishop called his deputy,

rebuked him for his hard heart, and lack of his faith and asked him to return the pound to the poor man, not to take back the fifth of the pound and to give him also a quilt because it was winter. When the deputy protested the Bishop said "The Lord will provide". After the poor man left, the Bishop received from one of the believers a money order for ten pounds and an invoice for receiving ten units of wheat.

One day a poor woman went to him when the Bishop had no money. But someone had given him a shawl which he never used. He apologised to the woman that he had no money, gave her the shawl saying that she may sell it and use the money. The woman took it and went to the market to sell it. There the owner of the shawl saw her, bought it from her and returned it to the Bishop. Before giving the shawl to the Bishop he asked him "Father why did you not use the shawl as it is cold these days?". The Bishop replied "The shawl is upstairs my son" meaning that it is with Jesus. Then the man presented the shawl and returned it to him. The Bishop said "I hope you gave the poor woman the right price". The man replied, "Yes father, I gave her the right price".

There are many written and unwritten stories about this saint who was a great example in ascetic life, selflessness and love to the poor.

The Lord gives us to imitate him and benefit us by accepting his intercessions and prayers for us.

CHAPTER 4

SPIRITUAL READINGS

- A) The material of spiritual readings**
- B) The purpose of spiritual readings**
- C) Benefits of spiritual readings**
- D) How to read**
- E) Time of reading and its quantity**

There are various kinds of religious readings, but we are writing here about spiritual readings, which inflame the spirit with God's love, straighten our personalities and purify our souls and bodies from all evil.

A) THE MATERIAL OF THESE READINGS

There are three basic sources for spiritual readings, which are:

1. The Holy Bible: The Old and New Testaments, with commentaries, meditations and biographies of the writers of the Book.

2. The Sayings of the Fathers: Ascetic books which deal with virtues. These are better read gradually and offered to each person according to his needs.

3. The Lives of Saints: Whether they lived in the world or the desert, whether martyrs, monks, ministers, heroes of faith or leaders of Christian thoughts etc.... Reading their biographies offers us living examples of Christian virtues. Mari Isaac said, **“The news of the saints is very desirable in the ears of the meek like watering new plants.”**

B) THE PURPOSE OF READING

One has to know the purpose of his reading and always remember it so he may not deviate from it. For example, reading the Bible has many forms, which may vary from one person to the other. The purpose from reading the Bible is to know its contents, stories, characters, and commandments.

However, the purpose of another form of reading is to stop at a certain verse, meditate on it, apply it to one's self and benefit spiritually. These two kinds of reading are included in our discussion and they are different from the third kind of reading which is mainly to study and to deeply know the Bible. This kind of reading involves accuracy in information and does not stop at mere general knowledge, but researches very deeply and accurately to know the meaning of certain words with the help of various dictionaries, references to old translations, making comparisons, and coming out with conclusions.

This study includes the introduction of each book, its geography, symbols, prophecies and proofs. Moreover, it involves explaining difficult verses, which may seem contradictory and solving problems, which may contradict with science, philosophy, physics, astronomy, history, geology, and anthropology.

All this is very useful and important, but it does not fall under our subject, for we are concerned with the meditation of the spirit, not the activity of the mind.

C) BENEFITS OF SPIRITUAL READING

Reading, in general, gathers the mind from its wandering and leads it to concentrate on the subject of the reading. When the topic of reading changes, the kind of thoughts will change also. **Mari Isaac said,** “Remembering virtuous people renews in us the desire of virtue. Likewise, the thoughts of philosophy renews in us evil desires.” **Therefore, spiritual reading does not gather the mind from wandering in material and carnal things, but it lifts it up to the world of the spirit and opens before it the door of divinities to taste how good the Lord is. Therefore, spiritual reading has two benefits: one is negative and the other is positive.**

1. The Negative Aspect: is to avoid evil or vain thoughts, hence spiritual reading is used as a sword for chastity to attack evil thoughts, and thoughts of anger and to calm the soul.

2. The Positive Aspect: is to lift the thoughts to divine matters. This aspect has many gradual steps, which may allow the person to have his thoughts with continuous unity with God.

3. Spiritual reading is a door through which the person may be fervent in the soul. The soul, which became very cold spiritually due to its concern with materialism, or its influence with bad company, may remember God and the saints and its pure nature and may desire to return to that state. Spiritual reading may inflame God's love in the hearts and may instill the desire to imitate the saints and to apply the virtues mentioned in the Bible or the lives of the saints.

4. Moreover, spiritual reading kills monotony and laziness and facilitates the virtues in the eyes of the reader and puts in his heart readiness to start working. Hence, the person feels as if fire is pushing him to obtain all the virtues, and all carnal desires become as trifles in his eyes. He despises them and does not remember them any more.

5. Spiritual reading, which creates the desire to imitate the righteous people, becomes the material for spiritual readings. Whenever a person reads about a certain virtue in the lives of the saints and he wants to imitate it, he starts training himself in it. Hence, virtue is transferred, through reading, from the book to the notebook of spiritual exercises and becomes part of his life. It is said that the door of virtues is opened to whoever starts spiritual reading.

6. Whoever reads about God's commandments and the virtues finds in them a true mirror where he can see himself, or finds a scale where he can evaluate his actions and personality. Therefore, reading becomes a means of examining one's self and afterwards repenting.

7. Whenever a person reads the biographies of the saints and apostles and looks at the high standards which they have attained after hard labor, patience and struggle, whenever he puts all these virtues on one side of the scale and puts himself on the other side, he feels how little he is and that he is still a beginner. Hence, reading leads him to true humility, which is built on true knowledge of one's self. The more he reads, the more he becomes humble, for he remembers God's saying, “He who knows more, more is required of him.”

8. Spiritual reading is also a subject matter for prayer. The kind of prayer varies according to the kind of reading. **One kind of reading may let the person feel the burden of his sins and weaknesses.** Then he bows down in sorrow and with contrite heart, confessing his sins to God, asking His mercy and forgiveness. **Another kind of reading may stir in a person the love of virtues so he prays with persistence asking God for grace and help so that he may follow the road of our Fathers.** Another kind of reading may stir in the reader the love of others so he lifts up his hands praying for them.

Another kind of reading may reveal God's beautiful qualities and unlimited greatness so he kneels down glorifying God for these qualities, feeling his unworthiness to talk with such a Great God, then one starts praising God with expressions of gratitude. Reading is an incentive to prayer. Moreover, it is a subject for prayer. Mari Isaac said, "From reading, one's soul is enlightened in prayer." He explained this by saying, "When one approaches prayer, the memory of what he has read will guide him to what to say."

9. As a reading is a subject for prayer, it is also a subject for meditation. You may read a verse from a chapter from the Bible and meditate on it, or you may read a story of the Church Fathers and meditate on the greatness of the grace, which God has granted this father, or you may meditate on how much that father had loved the Lord.

Also, you may reflect on the ladder of virtues which that saint has climbed step by step toward God. You may read a chapter from the Bible and store it in your mind for future contemplation. As the evil proceeds from the evil heart of an evil person, remembering all what he has read from dirty topics or magazines or stories, also the righteous person reads spiritual topics and stores them in his mind. The memory of these readings will nourish his spirit. He finds a subject for meditation in his prayers and quiet time. As a result of these readings, his thoughts will overflow like a good spring of spiritualities.

10. Spiritual reading is the guide to the road to God. It reveals to the person the will of God and enlightens his way. The Psalmist said, "Your Word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." (Psalm 119:105) When one reads the Word of God and the biographies of the Fathers, he acquires knowledge and discovers the ways of a pure life. Moreover, reading gives him a kind of discrimination and wisdom, although these are attained fully by experience and application.

11. There are other advantages for reading which vary according to the occasion and the reasons that lead to them. There may be a sad soul, wearied from temptations and tribulations that need choosing certain chapters to comfort him or strengthen him. These show him God's help in similar circumstances, or the behavior of the Fathers in more difficult cases, or they may explain to him God's wisdom in allowing these temptations. Hence, his soul rejoices and his sadness is gone.

There may be a person who committed a terrible sin, and afterwards the devil tried to make him fall in despair. Reading about repentance, the lives of penitents and God's acceptance of them brings hope to his heart. Then, he proceeds to God with hope.

A third person may have prayed to God for a specific subject and did not find any answer to his prayer so he may think that God has refused his request or rejected him personally and that God does not listen to him any more. Upon reading a spiritual book or a chapter from the Bible pertaining to his subject, his heart will send the right solution in the appropriate time and in God's own better way.

12. Spiritual reading strengthens the mind and activates the thoughts. One thought begets another thought or thoughts. Whoever reads much with meditation, exercises his spiritual senses for spiritual thinking to the content that he finds an atmosphere for spiritual meditation in all subjects of his reading. He may come out with a benefit from any good book he reads, if he reads it in a spiritual manner. He may also find an atmosphere for meditation in any thing he may see because he has practiced spiritual reading.

13. Spiritual reading is a useful way to pass time, occupy the mind with what is beneficial. It is a helper in solitude, killing monotony and expelling bad thoughts. It also helps and encourages one to be alert.

D) HOW TO READ

1. Start reading by prayer: so you do not depend on your human mind, which may err but rather ask the Holy Spirit to guide you. Before your spiritual reading, **pray telling God how weak you are and how your understanding and human mind are limited and incapable to reach the Divine words which the prophet David said, "Open my eyes so I may behold wondrous things out of Your law."** (Psalm 119: 18) Ask God to open your mind to understand and open your heart to accept what you understood and to strengthen your will to implement what you have accepted. **Mari Isaac said warning** everyone, "Do not approach the sayings of the mysteries of books without praying, asking God's help and telling God to let you feel the power behind the words." Prayer is the key to real understanding of the Divine books.

2. Put yourself in the subject of the reading and consider it a special lesson for you personally. Do what you can do with discrimination. Be sorry for what you cannot do and pity your weaknesses in humility. Tell God your desires and ask the intercession of the saints who excelled in the spiritual road. Keep what you have read in your memory. Probably you will need it later in appropriate circumstances.

3. During meditation, avoid reading about problems and complicated thoughts. This is not the time for that, therefore, try to skim them.

4. Not all the books of the Bible can be a subject for meditation for beginners. Therefore, start meditating in the historical books. Read in them about the beautiful qualities of God, how God chooses His saints and treats them, and how the saints treat God and people. Following these books, come the educational books.

5. Remember that reading is a means toward a goal, and is not the goal itself. Therefore, if you have reached your goal from reading, then put aside the reading and occupy yourself with the purpose for which you have read. Reading is only a match, which inflames the soul with God's love. Therefore, if the soul is inflamed, do not keep busy with the match, but light your lamp with this holy fire and go out with the wise virgins to meet the Bridegroom. Put aside reading, for a while, and do the work of the Spirit which He did in you, whether by meditation, prayer, examination of one's self, weeping for your sins or spiritual exercises. **Never neglect this heat and continue in reading, lest it cools down, and then you seek it but do not find it.**

E) TIME OF READING AND ITS QUANTITY

No doubt, one needs to read with meditation, for this reading is the main factor, which activates the heart and mind and makes one grow in grace. However, one cannot be satisfied with this kind of reading, which may concentrate on only a few verses from the Bible, or else, tens of years may pass without one finishing reading the whole Bible. But one needs to know the whole Bible for many spiritual reasons, for this knowledge strengthens his meditation. When one compares the verses of today's meditation with other verses from previous readings, he may benefit greatly, and the talent of meditation grows in him.

But what should one do, then? Which kind of readings should he choose? There is a third kind of reading whose goal is study and search, and there is not enough time for all that. **What is the solution?**

The solution is simple and it is one of the following ways:

1. Either to combine both readings so he reads few consecutive chapters, but does not make these his subject for meditation, because his time as a busy person is not enough to meditate on all that. Instead, he can meditate on only a few verses or a main idea. That kind of person can devote half an hour or more each day with twenty minutes for reading and ten minutes for meditation. Then he may increase this time gradually according to his needs and capacities.

2. The other alternative is to distribute the kinds of readings to different days and to evaluate him weekly, not daily, recording every day what he has read. This weekly schedule is more beneficial for it allows the reader more freedom. The end result, though, should be inclusive to all elements, not neglecting any.

3. The third alternative is to specify a special time every day for the meditation reading. The reading for knowledge should be added on certain days of the week when one has more time, but the weekly quantity should be sufficient.

4. One should take advantage of opportunities. When one has more time any day or if one has a vacation, he can read without limiting the quantity of what he reads and studies from

the Bible. He considers these as periods of storage and contemplation, which benefit him when he is extremely busy in other times.

In any case, one must choose the appropriate time. One should not give God the leftovers of his time when he is extremely exhausted, busy, or annoyed, lest he does not benefit from reading as he should, or else he may feel that his spiritual reading is a burden upon him.

CHAPTER 5

THE HOLY BIBLE

"Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls"

(James 1:21)

- A) God's Book**
- B) Blessings of the Bible**
- C) The word in the lives of men of God**
- D) Place of the Holy Bible among our reading**
- E) Why do we study the Holy Bible?**
- F) How to study the Word of God?**
- G) Methods of studying the Bible**
- H) The Coptic Church and the Bible**

A) GOD'S BOOK

In spite of the increase in the number of books and published material which appear every day, and in spite of the progress in human knowledge, the **Holy Bible** is still unconditionally number one amongst all of them. It is indeed God's Book and the Book of books.

Naming it "the Holy Bible" is not the deed of man, but of the Holy Spirit the writer of the Book "and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 3:15), ...**"the gospel of God** which He promised before through His prophets in **the Holy Scriptures"** (Romans 1:1, 2). This naming differentiates - without doubt - between the message of God **"the Holy Bible"** and of the other books which men author in different branches of knowledge.

The Holy Bible is God's Book from its beginning to its end. It contains many books, some of which are ascribed to known writers such as Moses, David, Solomon, Matthew, Luke, and Paul. Yet these were not their own writings. **The writer of God's Book, from its beginning to its end is the Holy Spirit - the Spirit of God** "knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, **but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit"** (2 Peter 1:20, 21). St. Paul also says **"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God"** (2 Timothy 3:13).

All those who made an effort to resist the Bible and studied it for the purpose of discrediting it, were either attracted by it or were destroyed by it.

The Holy Bible is in two Testaments: the Old Testament and the New Testament. The word "testament" means covenant between God and man. They were also called testaments because they were marked by blood. The Old Testament was marked by the blood of slaughtered animals and the New Testament was signed by the Blood of Christ.

THE ONENESS OF THE BIBLE AND ITS OBJECTIVE:

The Holy Bible is a truly amazing Book. It contains 73 books (46 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament). They were written during a period of 1500 years by about 40 writers of different backgrounds. Among them were kings such as David and Solomon, shepherd Amos, priest Zechariah, prophets such as Samuel and Isaiah, legislator Moses, commander Joshua, fishermen such as Peter and John, scholar Paul and physician Luke. It was written in distinct places such as the Sinai desert, wilderness of Judea, cave of Adullam, a prison in Rome, the island of Patmos, palaces of Mount Zion, shores of the rivers of Babel and in Jerusalem after it was rebuilt. **With all the diversities in the personalities of the writers, the places and the times of writing,**

its 73 books form one book, in spirit, subject and objective. **There is no wonder in this:**

(1) The centre around which the Bible rotates from its beginning to its end is "Jesus Christ the Son of God". The beginning of the Holy Bible tells us that He shall bruise the head of the serpent (the devil) (Genesis 3:15) and at the end of the Bible (the book of Revelation) we read that He is coming quickly, and His reward is with Him, to give to every one according to his work (Revelation 22:12).

The Lord Jesus asserted this fact when He commented to the Jews that their Holy Books "testify of Me" (John 5:39). And in the dusk of the day of His Resurrection "beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them (the Disciples of Emmaus) in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself (Luke 24:27). He again confirmed this fact to His Disciples who were gathering before His Ascension saying "These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled **which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me**" (Luke 24:44).

(2) The heart of the Bible is the ways of God with the people. He approaches them according to His free grace and by raising their hopes in Him. The story of God in all of the Book concerns His coming near man who is hiding from God, where God declares Himself to him and raises his hope in Him. God called to Adam after Adam's fall and said to him "Where are you?" (Genesis 3:9). Man hides away from God wherever he is and in whatever he does, and God looks for man to show him the way of salvation.

In the Holy Bible God appears different from gods in the books of other religions. In other religions, we see that man searches for god. But in Christianity, God searches for man, and that is the beauty of Christianity. Man the imperfect, the sinner, weak in all respects, is unable by himself to reach God the Holy One, without sin Who lives in unapproachable light!!

(3) The Holy Bible teaches us that the grace of God does not reach us directly, but always through a mediator. It teaches us - that in order for us to receive the forgiveness of our sins - that requires the work of atonement and mediation, and that God does not overlook sin.

This principle is displayed in all the Bible from its beginning to its end. **From here we find the Old Testament full of prophecies about the Messiah (Christ) "there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus"** (1 Timothy 2:5). The Gospels show Him present and working, the Epistles look at Him with faith and knowledge and wait for His second coming and the book of Revelation speaks about His authority and His eternal Kingdom.

THE EVERLASTING BOOK:

The Holy Bible is distinguished by its profound effect on the souls of its readers who approach it with faith and humility. It did and still does urge its readers to get rid of their sins, no matter how heavy and complicated they are. For true believers, the Bible is like Samson with all his strength, and for the proud and the unbelievers it is like Samson himself but after he shaved his head and lost his strength!!

In spite of the fact that the Bible has been translated into about 850 languages, it did not lose its power, action and effect. This is due to the secret of its strength; not the eloquence of its words or its attractive style, but to the Spirit which its words contain. The Lord Jesus said "The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life" (John 6:63). It was able to attract millions of hearts to God after it stirred them to repentance, and brought them joy and peace and filled them with hope. There is no wonder in that, as it is a live book, strong, and effective in the souls of those who read it with faith.

In the eighteenth century, **the French philosopher Voltaire said** that twelve men laid the basis of Christianity and that he himself would discredit it. He added that the Holy Bible would be a forgotten book within one hundred years. Yet hundreds of years have passed and nothing that Voltaire anticipated has happened. To the contrary, **the harsh scientific criticism which faced the Bible in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, revolved to detailed study of the Holy Bible, of its history and of all which relates to it. The Bible came out from this dilemma - the dilemma of the new age - stronger than those who criticised it had imagined .**

New archaeological discoveries, linguistic studies and the like served in uncovering the authenticity of the Bible and the truth of its stories in a way the scholars did not foresee.

It is true that the Holy Bible will remain an everlasting book, and not one of its words will ever fail. That is according to the saying of Lord "For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled" (Matthew 5:18). "Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away" (Mark 13:31). See Revelation 22:18-19.

B) BLESSINGS OF THE BIBLE

There are uncountable blessings in the Word of God. **We never hear about anybody who lived a holy life, without the Holy Bible being the basis of forming his spiritual life.** We never hear about a faithful minister, a successful missionary, a struggling hero of faith, without the Holy Bible being the secret of his success, the source of his inspiration, his support and his strength.

In the past, God commanded the placing of **the two tablets of the Covenant upon which the Ten Commandments were written by the Fingers of God in the Ark of Testimony,** together with the pot of Manna (Hebrew 9:4). This place is a gentle reference to the heart of the believer where the Word of God is kept, and where the Lord Jesus dwells; the real Manna Who descended from heaven for the life of all the world.

We all know that because of the first fall, the whole of mankind was expelled from Paradise - their original home - to the world where we now live, referred to as a foreign home, in which we are all aliens. This foreign home is full of darkness and mankind is in a constant state of war against his old enemies "the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places (Ephesians 6:11). The Lord explained in His Holy Book that the main help in our sojourn and wars against our enemies is the Word of God. **This principle is utterly clear in the whole Bible. The Bible is:**

(1) Good Tidings of Hope and Comfort:

Mankind has to die as the result of disobedience and transgressions. **Meanwhile the Holy Bible brings to us glad tidings of life and freedom. It calls for sonship, liberation from slavery, cessation of the curse of the Law, descendance of the blessings of the Cross and Resurrection, better life and the fellowship with God.** What a beautiful message which the Bible carries "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, who bring glad tidings of good things!" (Romans 10:15).

Every fifty years the Jews used to celebrate a year known as the "year of Jubilee" (Leviticus 25:11). They celebrated this year in a splendid way according to the Law. When the horns were blown announcing the beginning of the year of Jubilee, Joy found its way to many broken hearts. The poor who had sold his house or his land out of his hand, got it back, and the person who sold himself as a slave was liberated (Leviticus chapter 25). For this the Psalmist blessed "the people who know the joyful sound" (Psalm 89:15). The joyful sound here refers to the sound of the horns announcing the beginning of the year of Jubilee.

The Holy Bible is the Divine horn which proclaims the coming of "the acceptable year

of the Lord" (Luke 4:19), so that we reown our heavenly home which we lost by sin and disobedience, and regain our freedom after we enslaved ourselves to the power of sin and fell into the hands of Satan.

The Holy Bible not only bring us glad tidings, but it is also a great source of strength and hope, and boosting of the moral spirits.

Among the strongest weapons in the hands of our spiritual enemies, is the spreading among God's people, of the sense of weakness, defeat and surrender. The Holy Bible, on the other hand, rejects such wicked moods and replaces them with faith, complete confidence in the Lord, trust in the hope of His salvation, and that He will come with might, even in the last quarter of the night, for all who wait upon Him.

We read the words of Moses to his people when fear and horror got hold of them "Do not be afraid. Stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord, ... The Lord will fight for you, and you shall hold your peace" (Exodus 14:13, 14). We hear after that about the deeds of the Lord with His people in the bare wilderness in the period of forty years. He supported them with the food of the angels and gave them water from a mute rock. He preserved their clothes and shoes, and gave them victory over nations which exceeded them in number and equipment.

We read about the great works of God with God's fearing men everywhere and in every generation and about His very many promises to them "Because he has set his love upon Me, therefore I will deliver him; I will set him on high, because he has known My name. He shall call upon Me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble; I will deliver him and honor him. With long life I will satisfy him, and show him My salvation" (Psalm 91:14-16).

We read the words of the Lord of Glory "and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). We read about the experience of Paul "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31) and "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13). We also read about the love of God to sinners and His compassion towards them. Hence we should never lose hope, but rather gain strength and be encouraged.

Life's difficulties are numerous and hard, and because of them many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another (Matthew 24:10). **God gave us His Book to support us in our sojourn, a strong constant comforter. We find it near to us in all times, and can sit listening to it as long as we wish. When troubles surround us, there is no better than God's Word to comfort and encourage us.** There is no real comfort in what the people utter, and as Job said in his misfortunes "Miserable comforters are you all!" (Job 16:2).

The Word of God has always been the source of comfort to all of God's people. David says "Remember the word to Your servant, upon which You have caused me to hope ... This is my

comfort in my affliction, ... I remembered Your judgments of old, O Lord, and have comforted myself... Unless Your law had been my delight, I would then have perished in my affliction" (Psalm 119:49, 50, 52, 92).

St. Paul explains this matter by saying "For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, **that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope**" (Romans 15:4) ... **He commanded the believers to seek comfort from the Bible by saying "Therefore comfort one another with these words"** (1 Thessalonians 4:18). The source of comfort of God's Word is not only due to its accounts about God's people, their forbearance, patience, and what God did with them, or what it contains from fair meanings, **but to the fact that the words of the Holy Books were written by the Holy Spirit "The Helper"** (John 14:26).

(2) Light and Guidance:

Perhaps the forefront blessings of the Word of God are the moving of the hearts to repentance, whether via reading or hearing it. The few words of **Apostle Peter** which appeared as a sermon on the day of Pentecost, were a source of stirring the hearts of three thousand souls to believe in Christ (Acts Chapter 2). The words of **Apostle Paul** - in prison - were the grounds of affecting, even frightening **Felix the ruler**, though - unfortunately - he lost this chance and sent Paul away (Acts 24:25). **Again by reading the book of Isaiah, the Ethiopia eunuch of great authority under Candace the queen of the Ethiopians**, and what followed of explanation by St. Philip, was the source of his belief (Acts 8:27-39).

In the past, the Lord said on the tongue of Jeremiah the prophet ""Is not My word like a fire?" says the Lord, And like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?" (Jeremiah 23:29). **As intense fire makes iron malleable, the Word of God melts hard hearts and as hammers smash the rock, the Word of God affects hearts which are solidified by sin and crushes them by its power.**

Since man is a stranger on earth, he needs a guide to lead him and hold his hand. The Word of God is like the pillar of light which used to lead the children of Israel in the Sinai desert. The Word of God also accompanies us until we enter - not the worldly but the heavenly Jerusalem. It is like the star which directed the Magi and kept going before them "till it came and stood over where the young Child was" (Matthew 2:9). Likewise, the Word of God goes before us, leads us, and delivers us to where Jesus is. It never makes a mistake, and never misleads those who follow it. **Hence we hear the words of the Psalmist "I am a stranger in the earth; do not hide Your commandments from me"** (Psalm 119:19). This shows us that the Word of God is the best guide for man in his sojourn.

It warns us when we turn away from the right way "Your ears shall hear a word behind

you, saying, "This is the way, walk in it", whenever you turn to the right hand or whenever you turn to the left" (Isaiah 30:21). It teaches and instructs us "For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope" (Romans 15:4). "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16, 17).

No wonder that we hear the men of God speak about the Law as a light and a lamp "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Psalm 119:105). The wise Solomon said "For the commandment is a lamp, and the law a light" (Proverbs 6:23). St. Peter points to the words of the prophets and says "And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed **as a light that shines in a dark place**, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts" (2 Peter 1:19).

For this reason - to express this fact - our Church lights candles during readings of the Gospel. St. Eronimos (Jerome) from the fourth century said "Lighting candles during the readings of the Gospel, a known custom in the Eastern Churches, is not to disperse the darkness but to express joy while hearing the Gospel, like the lit lamps of the wise virgins, and to fulfil the words of the Psalmist "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Psalm 119:105) and the saying of the Wise "For the commandment is a lamp, and the law a light" (Proverbs 6:23).

(3) A Weapon and a Helper:

The Word of God is a mighty power, nobody comprehends except he who has lived with it and by it and experienced it. The Lord Jesus Who left us an example, that we should follow His steps (1 Peter 2:21) **used this weapon in His argument with Satan who came to tempt Him.** In each of the three temptations, the Lord Jesus answered the devil by saying "It is written ..." (Matthew 4:4, 7, 10) [Compare respectively with (Deuteronomy 8:3, 6:16, 6,13)]. Blessed is he who keeps the Word of God, as the Word turns into power inside him. Blessed is he who fills his bag with the spiritual arrows which are the Word of God. He is not afraid to meet his enemies, like the young man David who went to meet the mighty Goliath (1 Samuel Chapter 17).

St. Paul described the Word of God as "**living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart**" (Hebrews 4:12). The Word enters the depth of the heart and uncovers what is in the soul from evil desires and sinful thoughts. Then it works to eliminate the evil from the soul because it is sharper than a two-edged sword. **The source of the power of the Word - as expressed by St. Athanasius - is God Himself Who dwells in His Words!**

When our teacher St. Paul commanded the Church of Ephesus to "Put on the whole armour of God" that they may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil, he mentioned a number of these weapons. He spoke about the breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith and the helmet of salvation. Though all these weapons are used at the time of war - as passive weapons employed for protection, the Apostle came forward and spoke about an active strong weapon which **"is the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God"** (Ephesians 6:10-11). The Word of God is like the sword for the fighter by which he slays his enemy.

The influence of the Word of God is well realised in our spiritual striving, as it has the power to bring the soul back to the road of righteousness "The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul" (Psalm 19:7). **It also has the ability to cleanse us from our deficiencies** as the Lord Jesus said "You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you" (John 15:3). **It even sanctifies the soul** "Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth" (John 17:17).

In total, the Word of God builds up our spiritual lives "So now, brethren, I commend you to God **and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up** and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified" (Acts 20:32). **It is also able to save our souls** "Receive with meekness the implanted word, **which is able to save your souls**" (James 1:21).

The Word of God girds the lions of our minds. When the thoughts wonder away from God, and start to slide down to the pit of vice, the Word of God does its work and comes forward to awaken the mind and makes it sober. For this St. Peter says "Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober" (1 Peter 1:13). **Also our teacher St. Paul says** "Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth" (Ephesians 6:14). **Truth is none other than the Word of God** "Your word is truth" (John 17:17).

When the leadership of the Israelites was transferred to Joshua son of Nun after the death of Moses, the Lord commenced His work with Joshua by telling him **"This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it.** For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success" (Joshua 1:8). It is clear from these words of the Lord that they are a direct command; His words shall not depart from our mouths. The reason "that you may observe to do", and the result "you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success".

The Psalmist tells us about a pleasant experience at the forefront of the Psalms "Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, ... **But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night.** He shall be like a tree planted by the "rivers of water", that brings forth its fruit in its season, whose leaf also shall not wither; and whatever he does shall prosper" (Psalm 1:1-3). What a pleasant experience of the Psalmist, and what a wonderful resemblance he introduced between the soul which delights in the law of the Lord and a tree planted by the rivers of water. The rivers of water here are the work of the Holy Spirit in

the believer (John 7:38, 39); the Holy Spirit Who wrote the Book.

(4) Measure of Perfection and Growth:

Often a Christian deviates from the proper way, affected by the spirit of the time, tradition and imitation of others. The spiritual values are then distorted in his sight and the measures he uses change according to his moods, imaginations and his subconscious motives. He thinks that his life is not bad as long as he does not commit (big) sins - according to his measure. **But when he resorts to the Book of God - the perfect Book, free from all errors - and judges himself by it and reads for example that God demands a perfect life from all of us, then he discovers his flaws and realises his mistakes.**

We ought to measure everything in the light of the Word "To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them" (Isaiah 8:20).

When Paul and Silas reached the Jews in Berea and spoke to them about believing in the Lord Jesus **"they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so"** (Acts 17:11). **The Holy Bible is like a fine scale,** when measured by it, the weight of our sins is known and we repent. It thus leads us to the road of perfection.

How beautiful is that which King David said "The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul" (Psalm 19:7). Our teacher St. Paul also said "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, **that the man of God may be complete,** thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16, 17).

The Lord Jesus said to the Jews who came to argue with Him "He who is of God hears God's words; **therefore you do not hear, because you are not of God"** (John 8:47). **These words of the Lord explain to us an important aspect of our spiritual lives. We may measure our growth in grace, according to our love to study the Word of God.** As we lose our appetite for the Bread of Life, we are sure that we suffer from a spiritual ill. It may be due to not breathing enough of the refreshing air in the fellowship with God.

This is expressed by what St. John Chrysostom said to his people in one of his sermons "When I see your strong desire and your swiftness in coming here in order to hear the holy teachings, and as I watch your desire and longing for the spiritual food which is the Word of God, I sense your growth in virtue. We rule that the body is healthy when we see it eat food with appetite

and pleasure. Likewise, your hunger for the Word of God, shows us clearly the readiness of your souls and their good health".

C) THE BIBLE IN THE LIVES OF THE MEN OF GOD

We do not know about a single saintly man of God except the Word of God is the basis of his life. We do not know about a single successful minister except the Word of God is the basis of his ministry and from it he was filled and was satisfied and also from it he gave to the thirsty souls. The Word of God was - and is - the spiritual table, from which all the saints feed, whether they are missionaries, ministers, ascetic people, or ordinary believers. They read it day and night. They keep the Word of God and the Word keeps them. They are enlightened by it and it shows them the way, and makes them a light which shines for many.

IN THE OLD TESTAMENT:

From the beginning, God gave great importance to the Word. He commanded His servant Moses saying "And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes" (Deuteronomy 6:6-8). Certainly, these words deserve our attention. Let us make from them a measure of our love to the Word of God.

When God started to deal with Joshua who led the people after Moses, His first command to Joshua was about keeping the Word "This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success" (Joshua 1:8). It is a clear command from God that His Words shall not depart from our mouths and that we strive to do the will of the Lord.

As for David the great, prophet and king, it is very difficult to portray how close he was to the Word of God. All his praises are full of melodies about the Word of God and his love to it. In one of them he says "I delight to do Your will, O my God, **and Your law is within my heart"** (Psalm 40:8). What a big and loving pen which wrote "Your law is within my heart". This deserves deep meditation. **From all of David's psalms, let us consider the everlasting praise, the melody of love to the Word of God; psalm 119.**

Psalm 119 is a unique chapter in the Bible and it is the longest. Nearly each one of its 176

verses contains an expression about the Holy Bible, such as "Your commands", "Your statutes", "Your decrees", "Your rules" and "Your law" etc. **This praise shows us that the believer lives by Word of God all his life:**

It is the secret of his power in the days of his youth "How can a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed according to Your word" (Psalm 119:9). **It is the meditation of the believer all the day** "Oh, how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day" (Psalm 119:97). **It is his meditation through the night also** "My eyes are awake through the night watches, that I may meditate on Your word" (Psalm 119:148). **It is his comfort for ever** "You, through Your commandments, make me wiser than my enemies; for they are ever with me" (Psalm 119:98). **The Word of God is most dear for him that he cries with joy** "The law of Your mouth is better to me than thousands of coins of gold and silver" (Psalm 119:72). Therefore I love Your commandments more than gold, yes, than fine gold!" (Psalm 119:127).

David also explained that the study of the Word gives profound delight by saying "I long for Your salvation, O Lord, and Your law is my delight. (Psalm 119:127). **It also gives him a new spirit** "I opened my mouth and panted, for I longed for Your commandments" (Psalm 119:131).

That was about David the harp of the spirit. **Solomon the Wise, his son, says** "My son, **keep my words, and treasure my commands within you. Keep my commands and live, and my law as the apple of your eye. Bind them on your fingers; write them on the tablet of your heart**" (Proverbs 7:1-3).

Prophet Jeremiah expressed his desire for the Word of God as if he wanted to eat it "Your words were found, and I ate them, and Your word was to me the joy and rejoicing of my heart; for I am called by Your name, O Lord God of hosts" (Jeremiah 15:16). **Again the Prophet Ezekiel** tells us that God shows us by amazing words the power of the Word and its delight "Moreover He said to me, "Son of man, eat what you find; eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel". So I opened my mouth, and He caused me to eat that scroll. And He said to me, "Son of man, feed your belly, and fill your stomach with this scroll that I give you". **So I ate it, and it was in my mouth like honey in sweetness. And He said to me: "Son of man, go to the house of Israel and speak with My words to them"**" (Ezekiel 3:1-4).

IN THE NEW TESTAMENT:

In the New Testament our Lord Jesus Christ reveals the place of the Word. In the twelfth year of His Divine Incarnation, He was found sitting in the Temple as a boy Who loves the Word of God, sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them and asking them questions (Luke 2:46). And when He accepted to be tempted by the devil, He defeated the devil by the power

of the Word. In every one of the three temptations, Jesus answered the devil by "It is written ...". **He explained to us that the Word is the food for the spirit "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God"** (Matthew 4:4) [Compare with Deuteronomy 8:3].

The Word is the proof of His love "If you love Me, keep My commandments" (John 14:15), "The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life" (John 6:63). **He also tells us that the ignorance of the Word** is a source of making mistakes. He said to the arrogant Jews "You are mistaken, not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God" (Matthew 22:29).

More than that Jesus explained to us that the Holy Books are sufficient and able in their work for the salvation of mankind. In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus; when the rich man asked Abraham to send Lazarus to his five brothers that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment, the answer of Abraham was "They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them". But the rich man again begged Abraham saying "No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent". This time the answer of Abraham was "If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead" (Luke 16:27-31). **And it happened, as He spoke these things, that a certain woman from the crowd raised her voice and said to Him,** "Blessed is the womb that bore You, and the breasts which nursed You!". **But He said, "More than that, blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it!"** (Luke 11:27, 28).

The early Christians were careful in teaching their children the Word of God since their childhood. Our teacher St. Paul pointed to that when he wrote to his disciple Timothy saying "and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 3:15). **As for the youth, the Word was the source of their steadfastness and power.** St John wrote to them "I have written to you, young men, **because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the wicked one"** (1 John 2:14).

The Epistles in the New Testament are full of verses which show the importance of the Word of God - we referred to that when we spoke about the blessing of the Book. **Finally we see that God shows the importance of the Word** in the book of Revelation as He says "Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, **and keep those things which are written in it"** (Revelation 1:3).

All these written commands were reflected in the lives of the saints of the Christian Church. We found that they made a big effort in studying the Holy Bible and we see that they learned by heart many parts of it. The book of Psalms is only one of the beloved holy books which they learned and used in their prayers. We sense this fact clearly in their sayings and their writings, that the word of Christ dwelled in them richly (Colossians 3:16).

D) PLACE OF THE HOLY BIBLE AMONG OUR READING

Published material is on the rise every day, and there is not enough time to read everything we wish to read. Hence one picks up what he can and leaves the rest. There is also big a amount of books, magazines and pamphlets which contain religious knowledge about the Holy Bible, Divinity, doctrine, Church history and the like which many saints and scholars wrote. Yet, without doubt, the Holy Bible surpasses all of them enormously. It is the sun and the rest are none other than dark planets which reflect whatever bright lights falls on them from it. **For this reason it is not at all suitable, at any time, to count on these books without the Holy Bible**, which requires specified times for its study.

Effective sermons, written lessons, periodicals and religious books, cannot by any means replace the personal quiet study of the Word of God. **We make a big mistake when we read the man-made books more than we read the Book of God "Blessed is the man whom You instruct, O Lord, and teach out of Your law" (Psalm 94:12).**

In the past, few people could read, and not many books were published. People used to gather around a reader who owned a copy of the Holy Bible, or some of its books, and listen to him. They listened solemnly and with joy, thanking God for this unique opportunity, remembering the praise of the Lord "Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it" (Revelation 1:3).

In our time, the Bible is available to everybody, and those who can read are very many. Yet few are those who come eagerly to satisfy their thirst from the source of the living Book. **The gift of reading is one of the most important gifts for modern man. It is not correct for him to stand in front of the throne of the Lord of Glory in the last day and apologise for not using this gift in studying His nurturing Word.**

When a dear friend sends you a letter, you anxiously open and read it to know the news it contains. You do all that eagerly and joyously. Should such feelings be directed towards Him Who sends you His Holy Scripture in which He entrusts you with glorious mysteries, news and promises full of happiness and joy and carries to you the breeze of comfort and the tune of eternity!! Your feelings should be deserving like the feelings of David who said "For I have chosen Your precepts.

I long for Your salvation, O Lord, and Your law is my delight" (Psalm 119:173, 174).

It is said "Make me to hear joy and gladness, that the bones You have broken may rejoice" (Psalm 51:8) and "A good report makes the bones healthy" (Proverbs 15:30). There are no words which carry glad tidings of salvation more than the Holy Bible. It is food for the spirit and nourishment for the heart.

The followers of Jesus should have specified hours in which they meet their Teacher the Lord Jesus, and His Word should have the priority in our thinking. You should give the Lord the early parts of your time, which are the first hours of the day, because it is difficult to attend to holy thoughts when we become busy with our daily duties. It was necessary for the Children of Israel in the past in the wilderness to collect the Manna before sun rise and the evaporation of the dew. **Likewise we should spend a good amount of time before eating breakfast in a personal loving study to the Bible, in which we collect the spiritual Manna, the food of our souls, as we travel in the wilderness of this world.**

We admit that the morning hour before eating breakfast may not be possible for some due to their circumstances and their work. The good Lord, loving to mankind, knows the circumstances of those sons. He makes special arrangements to meet them some other time during the day. He will give them a full reward as He did with the people of the eleventh hour (Matthew 20:9).

We also know that sufficient personal time to spend in front of God with His Book, may not be possible for everybody to the same degree. Yet the Lord repeats to those people once more the miracle of the Manna. In this, the Divine Revelation is fulfilled "He who gathered much had nothing left over, and he who gathered little had no lack" (2 Corinthians 8:15). That is, if due to our compulsory circumstances we can only collect a little of the spiritual Manna, this little we collect will be sufficient for us all day long.

We wish here to attract the attention to our duties towards our children and the Word of God. The Lord commanded His people in the past to teach His Word to their children "And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. **You shall teach them diligently to your children, ...** " (Deuteronomy 6:7). "Therefore you shall lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul, ... You shall teach them to your children, ... " (Deuteronomy 11:18, 19). The parents did as they were commanded. For this reason our teacher St. Paul praised his disciple Timothy that since childhood he knew the Holy books, and he referred to the genuine faith that is in Timothy, which dwelt first in his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice (2 Timothy 1:5). We should also accustom our children to listen to the Word of God, and when they learn to read, they study it.

E) WHY DO WE STUDY THE BIBLE

Numerous are our gains from studying the Holy Book of God. The Bible is:

(1) The Book of Salvation:

It is the Book which explains to us the case of the salvation of the human race from sin, and the rise from its fall by means of the redemption which God made for His people, and for the whole world. That happened by the death of His Son Jesus Christ. There is nothing more important than this case. It is the case which deals with the forgiveness of our sins, our salvation and our victory. That is, which deals with either our eternal destruction or our eternal life "without shedding of blood there is no remission" (Hebrews 9:22). "He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him" (John 3:36). "Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?" (1 John 5:5).

The Old Testament tells us of the works of God with His prophets and with His people, His teachings and His special commands concerning behaviour, worship and faith. He told us with signs and prophecies about His Incarnation. The New Testament tells us about the fulfilment of these prophecies in the person of Jesus Christ our Lord, His holy life in the flesh, His teachings and what concerns this new life.

Accordingly, the Holy Bible contains one connected subject, the story of mankind, which is the basis of religion, the basis of eternal life, the happiness of men and the most important event of our existence. For this reason the Lord of Glory told the Jews who resisted him and who pretended they knew the Holy Books "You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life" (John 5:39, 40).

The Lord Jesus addresses the Jews by saying "for in them you think you have eternal life", because they used to search them in order to extract from them the ceremonial law, while rejecting from them the teachings about Christ. Were they diligent, they would have found that they testify of

Him. As for us, we search these Holy Books because they carry for us the true message of salvation, and are able to lead us to the source of life, truth and eternal life.

(2) Nourishment for the Spirit:

The body is supported by different material foods, and the spirit is supported by the different spiritual foods, such as prayers, the study of the Word of God, and taking communion from the Holy Flesh and Blood of the Lord.

Among the spiritual foods, some kinds are not easy to get every day. Yet there are two kinds which are considered the daily food for the believer, which are prayer and the Word of God. **By prayer we speak to God, and by studying the Bible He speaks to us. According to St. Ambrose "We speak to Him when we pray and we listen to Him when we read the Holy Books"**. As if these two kinds of spiritual food are the two electric wires which are connected to the source of spiritual power from which we get our daily energy. A current goes from the heart to Him and another one arrives from Him to the heart. That is how we are enlightened.

What happens if someone does not eat his food? He will certainly gradually weaken until he dies. Accordingly, the spirit has its special food, which if it does not receive, it will dry and wither. We spoke earlier about the different blessings of the Bible, and the plan of Satan in his wars with men. He tends to make them neglect the Word of God and its study, in order to deprive them from its blessings. Slowly and gradually, he will be in charge of them. Our teacher David was aware of that and said **"Unless Your law had been my delight, I would then have perished in my affliction"** (Psalm 119:92).

When we eat food for the body, we do not know exactly how it changes to energy and strengthens our body and gives it the power of life. We still eat and live, as such transformation is overlooked and we feel our strength as we do our duties. **That happens in our spiritual lives. As we feed on our spiritual food, it transfers inside us into spiritual power, whose effect shows in the time of need.** Blessed is the believer who cares to feed his spirit as he cares to feed his body, by giving his spirit its special food which the Lord described "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4).

(3) Law of the Last Judgement:

Besides being the book of our salvation and our spiritual food, the Holy Bible is also the law by which we and the rest of the world are going to be judged in the last day. The Lord Jesus said "He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him-- **the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day**" (John 12:48). St. Paul said **"In the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel"** (Romans 2:16).

Hence if we are going to be judged by the Bible, it is better to know it and to live according to its commands. It has described to us some of the scenes of judgement.

F) HOW TO STUDY THE WORD OF GOD

(1) By the Spirit:

The Holy Bible is not an ordinary book or a product of human mind. It is the Book of God produced by His Divine Mind, written by His Holy Spirit. One may read a part of the scriptures and find ordinary words, while another reads the same part and enjoys its sweetness and discovers its amazing depth. **Truly, the Scripture has spiritual profundity and its depth is hidden behind its apparent ordinary words.**

A human eye may be able to read the printed words of the Bible and understand its direct and obvious meanings, in accord with most of the people. But few are able to realise the purpose of God from His Words, and read what is written behind them. **This requires that God opens our eyes in order to see His purpose. David ask the Lord saying "Open my eyes, that I may see wondrous things from Your law"** (Psalm 119:18). Nevertheless, it has been given to the children of God to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 13:11).

When the army of the king of Aram surrounded the city of Dothan in order to capture prophet Elisha, his servant Gehazi arose early and went out, there was an army, surrounding the city with horses and chariots. He was horrified and said to Elisha "Alas, my master! What shall we do?". So Elisha answered, "Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those with them". And Elisha prayed, and said, "**Lord, I pray, open his eyes that he may see**". Then the Lord opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw. **And behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire** all around Elisha (2 Kings 6:15-17). **The horses and chariots of fire were there from the beginning, but Gehazi could not see any of them until the Lord opened his eyes to see them.**

What happened? The same man and the same eyes could now see what is in front of them which they could not see before! There are superb spiritual meanings and many blessings in the Words of the Lord, but we cannot see them. We need the Lord to open our eyes to see them. **Let us - when we sit in front of the Bible - lift up our hearts in humility and ask Him to open our**

eyes, that we may see wondrous things from His law (Psalm 119:18).

It is not easy to search the depth of the Words of God. Scholars, saints, and ascetic people spent all their lives and did all they can to reach the depths of the Bible, especially its meditating spiritual meanings. None of them at any time could claim that he finished the study of the Bible and understood it. They instead felt that all their efforts are but few drops in a huge expanse of water, and are the first steps in an endless road!!

It is true that the Holy Bible was written for mankind in order that mankind lives with it, yet the Spirit reveals to every diligent person one of the many facets of the Bible. David lived in this experience and he said to God "I have seen the consummation of all perfection, but Your commandment is exceedingly broad" (Psalm 119:96). David was given the gift of prophesy, and God testified that his heart is set according to God's heart, and as well David spoke by the Spirit. If David had uttered these words, what could we say?

Indeed, the more we live in fellowship with God, and try to study the Scriptures by the Spirit, the Spirit will reveal to us new meanings, as much as we can sustain. God is willing to give us many blessings, all at once, and show us His mysteries, yet we cannot bear the weight of the Glory of God, nor His many comforts.

For this also David said **"I will run the course of Your commandments, for You shall enlarge my heart"** (Psalm 119:32). The more we keep the Lord's commands, the more He enlarges our hearts which sin has shrunk - **in order to be able to retain the most amount of His comforts, according to the words of the Lord "Therefore every scribe instructed concerning the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure things new and old"** (Matthew 13:52).

No wonder in all what we stated, as the Lord Jesus said **"The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life"** (John 6:63). The Words of God are spirit, which we cannot entirely enjoy and understand, except by the Spirit, as He said to the Samaritan woman "God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:24).

Some may describe the Holy Bible as dry and rigid, and deny all what we said about it. They in fact try to analyze the Bible with their bare minds and try to comprehend the Spirit and the Spirit's mysteries with their own reasons, and hence they fail. **One has to admit that the Bible has attraction even for thinkers. Yet there is a big difference between enjoying the Bible with the mind and enjoying it by the spirit.** According to this measure, there are many aspects of the Bible which we cannot reach with the mind, but we can sense by the spirit. For example:

Mary the sister of Martha sat at the feet of the Saviour conversing and listening to Him. The Bible did not mention her chats with the Lord nor the words of the Lord to her. The Bible

only praised her attitude. Yet by the spirit we can grasp that Divine talk if we give ourselves a place beside Mary at His feet!! The Spirit Who dwells in us, He Himself is the One Who wrote the Holy Bible. He also - according to His promise - will teach us all things, and bring to our remembrance all things that He said to us (John 14:26). St. Paul said "But as it is written: "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him". **But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God"** (1 Corinthians 2:9-10).

(2) With Reverence:

One might think that familiarity breeds indiscretion and imprudence in one's dealings. We have been granted great familiarity with the Lord as a free gift, but it is of a different kind. **The free familiarity of sonship which we received does not mean that we behave with no solemnity or fear towards God.** Certainly it is not the slave's fear of his master, but a reverence towards his father who loves him. **The more we grow in our spiritual lives and advance in our fellowship with the Lord, the more is our fear and reverence to Him and His Word.** The increase of our fear of Him and His Word is an indication of our spiritual growth. Obviously we have not reached the spiritual level of David, yet David used to say "**my heart stands in awe of Your word"** (Psalm 119:161).

Reading and listening to the Word of God, should be with complete respect and reverence. We should distinguish between the Word of God and the words of the people. Apostle Paul pointed to the reverence of the believers of the Church of Thessalonica to the Word of God by saying "... when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe" (1 Thessalonians 2:13).

As we read the Bible, let us feel that we are in the presence of the Lord. Some people, in their personal study - from their excessive respect to the Word of God - they read the Bible standing. Some other people read it kneeling!!

Great reproof will be for him who disregards a special message sent to him by the country's president, or despises a circular the president issued?! **The Holy Bible is the message of the Heavenly Father to every one of His Children. Our lack of reverence in front of His Word would not be correct.** In the past, the Lord said by the words of the Prophet Malachi "A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am the Father, where is My honor? And if I am a Master, where is My reverence?" (Malachi 1:6).

Dear brother, beware of any lack of respect, as you study the Word of God. Do not

read it as you are laying down on your bed, or sitting disrespectfully, as if you are reading a newspaper or a tabloid, unless you have to, due to some sickness or the like. God loves us as His sons, and He wants to see His children whom He loves in a state of goodness and virtue. There is a special blessing for him who study the Word of God reverently. In the past, the Lord said by Isaiah **"But on this one will I look: on him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word"** (Isaiah 66:2).

What is said about reading is also said about listening. When God speaks, Heaven listens and all in it listen solemnly. God Himself calls us to listen and pay attention to His Word "Listen to Me, My people; and give ear to Me, O My nation: for law will proceed from Me, and I will make My justice rest as a light of the peoples" (Isaiah 51:4).

Just before reading the Gospel in the liturgy, in the Coptic Church, the deacon alerts the congregation saying "Stand in the fear of God and listen to the Holy Gospel". Then he announces that he is about to read the Words of the Lord and says "Blessed be He who comes in the Name of the Lord, our Lord, our God, our Saviour and our King Jesus Christ the Son of the living God, to Whom is glory for ever Amen".

When Ezra the Priest and Scribe opened the book of the Law to read it to the people "all the people stood up. And they bowed their heads and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

... For all the people wept, when they heard the words of the Law. So the Levites quieted all the people, saying, "Be still, for the day is holy; do not be grieved" (Nehemiah 8:5, 6, 9, 11). This was the state of reverence and solemnity of the people in the shadow of the Commandments and the Law of the animal sacrifices. How much should our respect and reverence be when we read and listen - in age of the covenant of grace - the Word of God Who loved and saved us and sealed His covenant by His Holy Blood!!

(3) With Humility:

We spoke earlier about studying the Word of God in the spirit, and we said: Let us - when we sit with the Bible - lift up our hearts in humility and ask Him to "open our eyes, that we may see wondrous things" (Psalm 119:18). **Truly, God does not reveal His mysteries except to the humble "You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and have revealed them to babes"** (Matthew 11:25). He means here the wise and prudent in their own sight, and by the babes He means the humble.

When we plan to read the Bible, let us prepare our minds. Let us leave every earthly engagement, cross ourselves with the sign of the Holy Cross, and lift up our hearts to God asking Him to bless this opportunity and sanctify our minds. We acknowledge to Him our

ignorance and our short sighted minds. No doubt that God will respond and work "**Receive with meekness the implanted word**, which is able to save your souls" (James 1:21). Let us beware not to depend on our minds alone in understanding what is unclear. Relying on the mind alone made many people fall and created heresies. If we find difficulties in understanding an issue, we consult recognized commentaries of authors known to have an orthodox faith, and known to be gifted in this area.

We have to mention here that the Holy Bible was written for the common man, and not as a special book for cultured people for example. Yet it contains issues and expressions difficult to understand and need proper explanations from well trusted scholars who have healthy faith and correct doctrine. **Pointing to the Epistles of St. Paul, St. Peter says "in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures"** (2 Peter 3:16). This was what happened concerning St. Paul's writings during his lifetime. More is thus expected in our times!!

We say sorrowfully that this is what actually happened. Some people gave themselves the right to explain the Bible, on their own merits, ignoring the commentaries of the Church fathers and her saints. They leaned on their own knowledge and understanding, lead by the mind only, and disaster struck. **Different heresies and many denominations and factions were created which dissected the body of Christ, the Church, into pieces, and the world was denied the blessings of the one united Church.**

(4) By the Command of the Holy Spirit:

Nobody is able to explain to you the meaning of a certain article better than the author of that article, or a poem better than the versifier who wrote it, and so on. Accordingly, **if you want to know the Holy Bible well, ask the direction of the Holy Spirit Who commanded the saintly men of God to write it.** The Lord Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit will teach us all things and bring to our remembrance all things that Jesus said to us (John 14:26). "For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God" (1 Corinthians 2:10). Direct your heart to Him and tell Him "Open my eyes, that I may see wondrous things from Your law" (Psalm 119:18).

The simple hearted believer who depends on God and the help of the Holy Spirit, finds in the Bible treasures which the wise and prudent cannot find. Apostle John said "You do not need that anyone teach you; but as the same anointing teaches you concerning all things" (1 John 2:27). By the anointing here he means the anointing of the Holy Spirit which we have received in the sacrament of anointment after the sacrament of baptism.

I hope that we do not understand from the words of the Apostle "You do not need that anyone teach you" that each person depends on himself and on his own knowledge in

understanding the Bible. Again before we dealt with the point of "command of the Holy Spirit", we mentioned studying the Word of God with humility, and among the aspects of humility is not trusting in our own mind and our own knowledge "Lean not on your own understanding" (Proverbs 3:5).

It was mentioned about St. John Chrysostom, Patriarch of Constantinople that a young man complained to him about a certain matter. The Patriarch asked the man to meet him in his room in the Patriarchate. The man went twice to see the Patriarch but was told by the servant that his master was busy and cannot see him. Then one day the Patriarch asked his servant if the young man came to see him and was astonished to hear the servant's reply "Yes he came twice, but I send him away, because I found you busy writing in your room, with someone else sitting beside you dictating you". At that time the Patriarch was busy writing commentaries on the Epistles of St. Paul. The Patriarch asked his servant to describe to him that person whom he found sitting beside him in the room. The servant mentioned that he never saw him before, but he looks like the picture hanging on the wall which was of Apostle Paul. **The Patriarch nodded his head, because he realised what was happening. St. Paul himself was coming to assist the Patriarch in writing his commentaries!!**

(5) For Personal Benefit:

Among the means which help enjoy the Holy Bible, is studying it for one's personal benefit. If you as a minister, are studying a subject in the Bible useful for the ministry, let your main goal be to benefit yourself and to enjoy the Bible. Then you can benefit others and fill them. Do not study the Bible in a fragmented way. Consuming big amounts of food between long periods of time will not help a hungry person to be filled!! **If you sit with the Bible, do not leave it before you fill yourself with this living bread.**

When you read the Bible, try to receive a personal message from God. Try during the reading to pause every now and then and ask yourself this question "What does God want from me by these words?" Be like Samuel when he was in the temple, in that reverent place and the quietness of the night when he opened his mouth and said "Speak (Lord), for Your servant hears" (1 Samuel 3:10). Let us listen carefully to what the Mouth of the Lord says and to all what He wants us to understand.

You should feel that the Bible is a personal message from your Heavenly Father to you. Do not consider it a general message to all mankind, with you as one of them. True, it is so, but there is a vast difference between a believer who feels that **Christ suffered and died for his sake**, and another who feels that he is one person among millions of men who enjoyed the privileges of salvation!!

This point was clear in the life of Apostle Paul, as we hear him say "**The Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me**" (Galatians 2:20) and "In the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, **according to my gospel**" (Romans 2:16). Again there is a big difference for an alien when he reads the news about his country in a news paper, and when he reads a special message sent to him from his father!! We should consider the words of the Bible as a special message for each one of us.

Try to make use of all opportunities which the Bible gives you and to cling to all its promises. If for example you read a promise about the mercy of God to sinners, or a good deed with a lost person, lift up your heart and ask for the mercies of God and a similar deed with you. If you read about a person to whom Jesus humbled Himself and stayed in his home, open your heart and insist in demanding that He dwells in your weak temple, and so on. **The Lord wants you to ask him in confidence and persistently. He blames us saying "Until now you have asked nothing in My name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full"** (John 16:24).

Study your Bible regularly, and do not think that it contains some interesting books and other boring books, as "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for ever good work" (2 Timothy 3:16, 17). Study from it a sufficient amount every day. It would be even better if you specify a certain amount of reading which would be the lower limit, upon which you increase the amount whenever a chance arrives.

Perhaps the personal benefit becomes complete when we combine reading the Bible with studying it. Let for each of us be a note book in which he writes down the thoughts which come to him during his readings. One would attempt to comprehend the chapters and compare between the different points he wrote "Comparing spiritual things with spiritual" (1 Corinthians 2:13). It would be useful to underline the important verses in the Bible, and the like. Do not read the Bible superficially for your blessings only. Reading by itself is useful and beneficial, but studying it is necessary for getting a filling nourishment.

G) METHODS OF STUDYING THE BIBLE

There are various ways for studying the Bible, and individuals and groups like certain ways which they feel comfortable with and which suit their aims and possibilities in their study. We here present some methods as examples. Maybe some will find what is suitable of them whether continuously or for a period of time.

(1) Perhaps the most known method is that which follows some spiritual principles, which we explained earlier. In this method one lifts up his heart by prayer to God before and after the study. One then studies by the spirit of reverence, learns by heart some verses and make some comparisons between different issues.

In this method, when we start one chapter, it is better to review in our minds the contents of the preceding few chapters and the verses which we learned from them. When we finish studying this new chapter, we review its contents and learn from it by heart one or more verses. We end by lifting up our hearts to God. **This method is suitable for individuals, families or small groups.**

(2) Some people study the Bible while referring to commentary books, as well as writing down their own selected remarks. Some of those people keep a note book in which they write down some chosen verses, questions or comments. Some of them rebind their personal Bible after inserting an empty sheet of paper between every two printed pages of the Bible, on which they write comments in front of the selected verses.

(3) Some people like to add to the above methods, practical exercises from their readings. In the morning one studies a small portion of the Bible from which he chooses a certain point, or a verse and makes from it a subject to apply in his life during the day. When he returns home in the afternoon, he gives account to himself to how successful his exercise was, and asks for God's help to continue the exercise for the rest of the day. He accounts for himself again in the evening.

Some people like to choose from what they read in a certain day of the week - such as Sunday for example - a subject which they apply in their lives all that week. They prefer not to change the exercise daily, so as to get the maximum benefit from that exercise. Some people like to write down the points which may form a subject of a practical exercise which correspond to what they study. Then they practice these exercises one after the other.

(4) Some people accompany the study with prayer and meditation, and specify a certain time for that, which what should be. They pray first, then they study the Bible a verse at a time, in a meditating way. When they meet a point which touches their hearts, they reflect on it and lift up their hearts asking God to deepen its effect in their hearts. They learn by heart what they can, and move on.

Many people have benefited from this method and for some it is the method they always use. It also helps if one applies this method during certain times in the year, such as the mid-term vacation, week ends or on Sundays. Some youth apply this method of study in summer holidays, and spend long times every day practising it. Such summer holidays are of lasting benefit, and they retain many blessings from them. Some of those youth study the Bible individually and meet every day to discuss in a humble way, what they learn. By this means they form a Christian group with strong ties between themselves and with God.

(5) The subjective method of studying the Bible. Besides the spiritual preparation before reading the Bible, one writes down his notes on a specific subject such as prayer, purity, faith, love, service, ... etc, to study such subject during his reading. On every point in the subject one writes down all the verses in the Bible related to such point. After writing down these notes, one focuses his thinking in them. Such a method is useful, beneficial, fruitful and easy to apply.

(6) Group study. A certain part of the Bible is read by individuals separately. Then they meet together to listen to the questions of one after the other and comment on them. Or they meet to meditate on some of the points of what they studied separately. One of them who had prepared the subject leads the study.

One of the group methods, is to sit together where one reads a chapter of the Bible, and asks the members of the group to give their opinions or ask their questions and hear the answers. At the end, one member comments on the subject. In this method some members of the group may express some wrong opinions. Yet it is better to hear such opinions and correct them in the meeting.

It is important in these group methods, that a person should not give his opinion, every time he wishes to do so, else the others may think that he has the gift of teaching and that it is easy to comment on the Bible verses. Rather, one should ask quietly and discuss openly and to the point, remembering that he is in the presence of the Holy God and that he needs to be instructed, not to instruct. It is also important for the person who leads the group, to be a spiritual person, who has a correct understanding of the Bible, and is well versed in different religious subjects.

H) THE COPTIC CHURCH AND THE BIBLE

The Coptic Church devotes great care to the reading and studying of the Holy Bible, as is obvious in all facets of her worship. She is a live example to her children in this respect. She instructs them to **pray the hourly prayers (the Agbia) daily**, and she does that herself in her public worship. **The hourly prayers contain selected psalms from the book of Psalms, which suit the hour of prayer.** It is known that the Book of Psalms is full of prophesies about our Lord Jesus. Also each of these prayers contains a reading from one of the Gospels.

The chants which precede raising of incense on Saturday evenings and Sunday mornings and in the Holy Eucharists, are selected parts of the Bible, chanted in a special and lovely way.

The prayers of the Holy Eucharist from its beginning to its end constitute different parts from both the Old and the New Testaments of the Bible. There are also **the three teaching readings** in every liturgy. They are a **selection from one of the Epistles of St. Paul**, another one from the **Catholic letters**, and a third one from the **Book of Acts**. After that a portion from one of the four gospels is read.

Before each of the above mentioned four readings, the choir introduces the reading with verses from the Bible, a praise for God. The priest chants the prayer of the Gospel, and says "O Master, Lord Jesus Christ our God, Who said to His saintly, honored disciples and holy Apostles, "Many prophets and righteous men have desired to see the things which you see, and have not seen them, and to hear the things which you hear and have not heard them. But blessed are your eyes for they see and your ears for they hear"". These are the same words which the Lord uttered to His disciples (Matthew 13:16, 17). Preaching the congregation follows the reading of the gospel and is based on the read gospel.

All around the year, the Church selects special readings from the Bible which assert the different commemorations. Vivid examples are the chants of the Coptic month of "Kiahk", which precedes Christmas, and the readings of the Pascha (the holy week) which precedes Easter. The readings in the holy week are from very many books of the Bible, and they all speak about the Lord Jesus in the last week of His life on earth. On Good Friday, as we remember His crucifixion, the Church concentrates all the readings on the suffering of the Lord. She reads parts from both the Old and the New Testaments. The Church keeps awake all that night until the morning of the next day (Saturday), chanting different praises from the Old Testament. Then she reads the whole book of Revelation, with chanting whose words are excerpts from the same book.

The other ceremonial prayers of the Church, such as in baptisms, weddings, deaths and anointing of the sick, ..., all of them without exceptions are excerpts from the Holy Bible.

The Coptic Church encourages personal study of the Bible, and regards that as an effective means of grace, and an essential daily spiritual food.

The Coptic Church is different from the Roman Catholic Church. The latter denied the Holy Bible to her children and used to lock the Bible in the churches during the Middle Ages, so that nobody could read it. Until now the Roman Catholic Church does not allow anyone of her children to read the Bible, except in very limited cases, and after the person takes permission from the priest who tells him what to read.

I do not forget what happened once between myself and a spiritually mature Roman Catholic person. A long time ago, before I became a monk, I went to a Catholic book store which sold "the Jesuit fathers version" of the Holy Bible, and this person heard that I wanted to buy a Bible. He asked in astonishment "What do you want the Bible for?". I answered "to read it". He asked me if I go to church and hear the sermon of the priest, and I answered "yes". He continued by saying that in this case I do not need the Bible, as I hear the priest whose mouth utters the law, so the Lord said. I said to myself "What a difference between our Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic one".

We are unable here to portray in a detailed way, **how the Coptic Church is a biblical Church which extracts from the Holy Bible all her prayers, and practices in her worship.** From that she intends to attract her children to the Bible and encourage them to benefit from it in all aspects of life. We hope that one day an enthusiastic member of the Church will conduct a research which will present that in detail.

CHAPTER 6

Spiritual Exercises

“I myself always strive to have a conscience without offence towards God and men” (Acts 24: 16)

- A) Benefits of spiritual exercises**
- B) Sources of spiritual exercises**
- C) Characteristics of spiritual exercises**
- D) Duration of spiritual exercises**
- E) Exceptions to spiritual exercises**
- F) Purposes and incentives of spiritual exercises**
- G) A notebook for spiritual exercises**
- H) Examples of spiritual exercises**

A) BENEFITS OF SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

Spiritual readings, from all their sources, will remain mere sayings for mental knowledge until they are changed through exercises to become part of your life. Anything you train yourself to do will even eventually become a habit and easy for you to perform. The more you practice, the more it will become part of your qualities. This is the advantage of spiritual exercises.

The person who practices these spiritual exercises will climb the ladder of virtues step by step. Day by day his heart will be purified and he shall experience the spiritual life, so that if he were to tell others about it, he will be speaking out of actual experience and not just theory. Not only does he learn of the path to good deeds, but finds out the difficulties encountered along the way and how to overcome them.

He also knows his nature, his points of strength and weakness. He distinguishes the desire to do good from the ability to do it. He knows of all the factors that may influence him, and what temptations he can go through and win by the grace of God, and what situations he has to escape because of his inability to face the temptations.

Through exercises, a person knows the level of his spiritual status and the extent of his God granted capabilities. He knows his limits, and hence does not think of himself more than he should. Unveiling oneself makes it easier for a person to confess, and the task of seeking help through the father of confession becomes more effective.

Not only do the exercises make an individual aware of God's ways, and not only does he find out more about himself (his strengths and weaknesses), but also he can sympathize with others who are similarly struggling in God's way because he has experienced some of the enemy's devious ways and knows the strength of evil. He also knows of the times where one is unable to struggle and the times when God's grace forsakes him and he reasons for that! Hence, those who have mastered the spiritual exercises are God's children who are most likely to sympathize with fellow strugglers, who can endure people's faults and who are more capable of aiding those who succumb to temptations since they themselves have experienced how easy it is to be enticed and how difficult it is to overcome.

The individual who exercises knows the kinds of sins that tempt, from within, and from without, and the conditions under which one yields to temptation. He also knows the sins that tempt a person gradually and the type that comes in the form of virtues. He knows the diseases of the soul, whether hidden or apparent.

B) SOURCES OF SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

Spiritual exercises are either negative or positive. The negative ones train you to resist specific sins or to overcome personal weaknesses. But the positive ones enhance your spiritual virtues and qualities. Therefore, the most important sources of spiritual exercises are the following:

1. Previous Sins: sit and examine yourself and know your sins. You will find that you have occasional sins and repetitive sins. Exercise yourself to overcome the repetitive sins. Know the causes of these sins, what leads you to transgress, and then train to rid yourself of their roots.

2. The Holy Bible: God's Word is a light to your path; it guides and teaches you how to conduct yourself. **You can find His commandments and Biblical verses are good sources of for your spiritual exercises.**

3. General Church Practices: This is a very important matter. To begin with, practicing in all church services is a must because they were designed, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to help build the spiritual life of all believers. Therefore, a person cannot exercise one particular kind of worship while neglecting general worship services where all believers join in one spirit as members of one body. For example, **a person cannot practice a specific private fast and neglect the rest of the church fasts. The same applies to prayers and meetings. Examples of general church practices are: attending church regularly and on time, learning church hymns and rites as well as participating in them, general church prayers such as the Agbeya and Tasbeha, attending church in all special occasions, observing all church fasts, attending liturgy and receiving communion regularly, attending all services with humility and an alert mind.**

4. General Social Virtues: Many people train themselves to master the virtues of worship but neglect general social virtues. That is, an individual should **practice being a helpful and loved member of his immediate family and his close social circle.** He should train himself to treat everyone with courtesy and to be a productive member of the society.

5. The Lives of the Saints: The virtues of the saints are many and they can be a source of spiritual exercises. A person has to know the extent of his spiritual growth. That is, he cannot while yet a beginner, exercise on a virtue that a saint had attained under different circumstances and after a long struggle lasting several years. Therefore, we have to be wise in choosing the saints' virtues that suit our personal circumstances and our spiritual level, being gradual in practicing them.

6. The Causes of a Failure of Previous Exercise: If you have trained yourself for a virtue successfully and recorded how well you have done, you will find that at times you'll fail to maintain that virtue. **Consider the cause of failure and make it the target of a new exercise.** For example, suppose you have exercised the virtue of "Not to condemn others," then one day you failed doing that while engaging in a discussion concerning general church policy. Take that

reason for failure and practice not to meddle in a discussion until you have learned how to discuss without transgressing, or at least to be careful when you face similar situations.

C) CHARACTERISTICS OF SPIRITUAL EXERCISES:

Many have failed in their spiritual exercises because of the nature of the exercise itself. Therefore, **we shall discuss some characteristics which may lead to the success of spiritual exercises:**

1. The Clarity of the Exercise: For example, concepts such as “Meekness” or “Poor in spirit”, or “God's love” or “Estrangement” may be very vague to you. Do not attempt, therefore, to train yourself on such virtues, without knowing precisely how to go about it, which brings us to the following point:

2. Being Specific: Do not take the broad more encompassing virtues (Mother virtues), as the subject for your exercises, but **divide them instead into their various categories, and make each category a subject for an exercise.** For an example, you cannot exercise yourself on “love”, because love has a very broad meaning which covers the whole meaning of Christianity. St. Paul has mentioned some of the classifications of love in his first epistle to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 13:4-7). He divided love into fourteen classifications, and you cannot train yourself in all fourteen at one time. **Similarly, you cannot exercise other “Mother virtues” like meekness, humility, service, perfect prayer, silence, because they are all inclusive, but rather divide them and exercise yourself on one classification at one time. It is easier to implement a specific exercise.**

Also, you cannot carry out different exercises at the same time. Some people try to train themselves on five or six exercises all at one time. The result is that they forget some of them completely because of the inability to concentrate. Some may oppose that opinion claiming that this procedure is too slow, for they want to reach the end of the road fast. Our advice is that spiritual life needs patience and long endurance. When you achieve a specific virtue fast, you might lose it just as fast. A lasting virtue is very important, and to be steadfast in it is very essential. Do not get impatient, one cannot rush into a virtue, since the path to spiritual life is slow and stable. At times when God grants you His grace and you feel invigorated, you might then think that perfection is at hand and easy to attain. Keep in mind, however, that this is just a temporary visitation from God, and that you may return to your usual self because one's life is constantly changing.

3. The Time for Exercising: You cannot practice being silent, for instance, on a day when you are going to attend a special party or if you are planning on visiting many people or going to a picnic. This kind of exercise is liable to fail on such a day, and even if you do succeed, it will be at the expense of other unnecessary losses. Therefore, if you are afraid of making mistakes on such occasions, do not practice an exercise of complete silence but rather

one which would help you “to avoid evil talk.” **Also, some exercises may fail if they are inappropriate to the person's health, the availability of time, family circumstances, social environment, level of education, and the spiritual strength of the individual.**

4. The Element of Gradualism: Big thrusts into the spiritual life are unsafe, threatened by sudden failure and depression. If you carry out a detailed exercise in one big step, you may succeed a little due to your enthusiasm. But, because of your lack of training, it may not last, and you may even experience opposite results. **Therefore, go step by step,** and make sure you are well settled in one step before you go on to another. Hence, when tribulations arise and you are forced to regress, you will just go backwards to the previous step, and then be able to proceed forward again.

Those who do not train themselves gradually, however, will go all the way backwards because originally they did not pass through the various steps along all the way. Here is an example: two persons are training for the exercise of “silence.” The first person takes the one big step of not talking. The second one tries gradually, like avoiding passing judgment, avoiding topics of no concern to him, giving brief answers, not interrupting discussions, talking in a low voice, starting only necessary discussions, circumventing unfamiliar topics of discussion, and finally practicing complete silence.

Then, when circumstances arise and both persons are obliged to talk, the second person will be more cautious as he has trained himself, whereas the first one might fall back to his original state of condemning others, interrupting, talking loudly and uselessly, and so on. This is only because he did not practice going through the phases of silence. He then contemplates and realizes the importance of progression. He becomes aware of the fact that he kept his tongue silent without correcting the mistakes he could make when he does talk. This then leads us to the following important factor.

D) DURATION OF THE EXERCISE

How long does one keep practicing the same exercise? One saint practiced a single exercise for a whole year. St. Agathon practiced “silence” for three whole years before he could perfect the virtue of silence. One might wonder then, how we can train ourselves for so many virtues if each virtue takes that long to be attained. The answer is clear: all virtues are interrelated. For example, the one who practices “Continuous praying” will no doubt achieve the virtue of “silence” because talking with people will impede his talking with God. Therefore, he will not talk unless it is absolutely necessary. This will then lead to seclusion, for fear that mingling with people would lead to talking instead of praying. And seclusion, in turn, will lead him to exercise the virtue of “fasting.” The more seclusion, the less use of his energy, hence the lesser the need for food, and therefore he is able to fast.

Prayer, therefore, leads to fasting, and fasting, in turn, leads to silence. The nature of silence helps in meditation, the reading of the Holy Bible, and self-examination. All of this will help an individual to be pure at heart and thought. Prayers in themselves help us to be pure

because a mind that is occupied with God has no place for Satan. Fasting, in turn, also helps us to be pure by restraining the desires of the flesh.

Hence, we find the individual who theoretically trained at one virtue, has actually practiced several other virtues, all linked together like a mesh. A brief period of training is not enough if you are to benefit fully from the exercise, neither it is sufficient for you to sincerely test your steadfastness and durability. You might be able to endure well during the short period of training but fall apart in the long run. Moreover, the short period might not be enough to determine whether there is any conflict between a certain exercise and other virtues, nor whether there are any exceptions. Short periods of exercising, therefore, are not useful, and as Mari Isaac puts it: “Any exercise practiced briefly is fruitless.” The longer the period, the more useful the exercise will be.

We see that saints have found it necessary to train themselves over several years, what then of the average layman? Persistent, long term training is essential. Give yourself ample time and resist the boredom that you might experience during that seemingly tedious period. A solution could be to maintain a major exercise (one which requires an extended training period), alongside a relatively minor exercise that could be fully accomplished in a short period such as in two weeks.

E) EXCEPTIONS TO CERTAIN EXERCISES

There are some exercises that cannot be compromised, such as those pertaining to sin. We train ourselves to resist sin at all times, with no exceptions. There are some virtues, however, that can be practiced with flexibility. The virtues of silence, fasting, prayer, retreat or period of solitude, modesty, all fall within the category of flexibility or exceptions. Train yourself but do not become a slave to any one exercise. For example, a person becomes aware of his faults when he does talk, and he then decides to practice “silence,” as a goal to overcome such faults. Being a member of society, this individual should not adhere strictly to the exercise of “silence” because of his social obligations.

At times, the benefits of talking outweigh the benefits of keeping silent, and a person might actually be committing a sin against God if he does not speak out. This is considered an “exception.” St. Bersenofios said, “Talking for God is good.” And as Solomon puts it, “To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven, ... a time to keep silence and a time to speak.” (Ecclesiastes. 3:1,7) As a result of the exceptions, a person learns when to talk and when not to talk, whom to talk to, and whom to avoid, when to be concise and when to elaborate, when to be strict in talking and when to be kind and courteous. Once a person learns all that, he surely has gained the benefit of the exercise of “silence.”

Such a person is allowed to talk as he pleases, because he has learned the limits of talking. But he who offends or angers others, or causes problems by his silence, and if other people's rights are forfeited due to his silence, that person is considered a “Pharisee”, one who

follows the exercise literally not spiritually, and is a slave to that exercise without understanding the wisdom behind it.

F) PURPOSES AND INCENTIVES OF THE EXERCISES

Any person practicing an exercise has to be convinced of its benefits and the wisdom behind it, and the exercise has to be rooted in, or based upon Bible verses, the sayings of the Church Fathers, the lives of the saints or all of these combined.

A person might fail in an exercise if he does not know its general advantages or its benefit to him personally. If he encounters an obstacle in accomplishing the exercise, he will ask himself. What do I benefit from that exercise? If he does not know the answer, he will then stop exercising.

Therefore, before you start any exercise, understand it and be convinced of its benefits to you personally, and seek guidance. It might be beneficial to others but not to you, because you have different circumstances. After you are convinced of its benefits to you, study Biblical verses which encourages that exercise, and repeat the verses in your heart often especially when you encounter an obstacle, and remember then the sayings of the Church Fathers. This will support you, and you will not fall. Remind yourself constantly of the exercise so as not to forget it, and to renew your energy as well. Pray for long periods that the exercise be successful, and do not ever think that you may succeed without stumbling because of your strong will or your desire to accomplish that exercise. You do not know Satan's temptations, and you may not know your own weaknesses. Ask for God's help because you cannot accomplish anything without Him. Hence, when you do succeed in that exercise, thank God for helping you, and do not think that you have accomplished it on your own.

G) A NOTEBOOK FOR EXERCISES

This is an essential tool to remind you of the exercise, and to help you in self-examination. Keep a detailed record in your notebook. Do not just put check marks, but write the name of the exercise, the date, and how long it will take to accomplish. Write the Biblical verses, and the sayings of the Church Fathers that encourage that exercise. Write each day's date in the margin and have a blank space to record your self-examination at the end of each day.

If you succeed completely in an exercise, write down: "Thanks be to God," and you could indicate the factors that helped make the exercise a success. Or you can write down, "There was no evidence that the exercise was successful." And in case you quit the exercise, record the number of times you have abandoned it, why you have failed and with whom. Was the failure partial or complete, and was it intentional or unintentional? Try to avoid the causes of failure in the future, or take the causes themselves and exercise to overcome them. Some people put grades to evaluate themselves.

It is best to sum up this information at the end of each week and to arrive at conclusions which will help you in knowing yourself better. Some people write additional information in their notebook with this prayer **“Lord, without You, I can do nothing. I cannot control myself. These exercises are only a kind of prayer to express my desire to live with You, and not to show that I am depending on my own strength. Please Lord, help me with Your grace.”**

H) EXAMPLES OF EXERCISES

A. Exercises of Meekness:

1. **Not making anybody angry:** to avoid bothering or hurting anyone's feelings.
2. **Not losing one's temper.**
3. **To be calm at all times:** when talking, walking, or working and to be peaceful within yourself.
4. **Talking in a soft voice.**
5. **Avoid talking in a haughty manner.**
6. **Being courteous to others, big or small,** to avoid hurting anyone's feelings.
7. **Not interfering in other people's business.**
8. **No to be argumentative,** which could irritate others.
9. **Not interrupting a conversation** even if you have heard the topic before.
10. **Not to complain:** if need be, a complaint ought to be about a situation and not about other people.
11. **Bearing other people's faults with patience.**
12. **A pleasant face to all.**
13. **Being kind to everyone.**
14. **Obedience in general:** but not in matters pertaining to the guidance of one's life which is the concern of the father of confession.

B Exercises of not condemning others:

1. **Not to talk about people behind their backs.**
2. **Refraining from insults.**
3. **Avoiding complaints about people.**
4. **Not to display disgust with others in any manner.**
5. **Not to condemn a group as a whole, whether large or small.**
6. **To refrain from indirect condemnation,** that is when your listener condemns others from what you have said.
7. **Avoiding the discussion of certain topics that are known to lead to the condemnation of others.** This category can be divided into several parts.
8. **To avoid talking about certain individuals** with whom you are not quite friendly.
9. **Not defending oneself in a way which would consequently shed the blame on someone else.**
10. **Resisting condemnation by thought.**

C. Exercises of Silence:

These were discussed earlier and some are interrelated with the exercise of meekness and the exercise of not condemning others.

D. Exercises of Prayer:

1. Physical deference: the raising of the hands towards heaven, standing straight, avoiding a sluggish posture, kneeling at the appropriate times and guarding the senses (sight, sound, touch). This exercise can be done gradually, and not all at one time.

2. Veneration from within: the feeling of the presence of God and His greatness deep within the heart.

3. Training to pray with the aid of “Agbeya” or prayer book.

4. Memorizing psalms and other prayers from the “Agbeya”, so that eventually one can do without it.

5. Special prayers (not memorized) in addition to those found in the “Agbeya.”

6. Praying, “Lord Jesus Christ have mercy upon me, a sinner,” to be said at all times and in every place.

7. Continuous prayers: while walking or at work, or driving, or being with people.

8. Prayers before every deed: for example, before meals, before reading or studying, or before any act, whether physical or mental.

9. Blending work with prayers whenever possible.

10. Extending the periods for prayer: (especially when time permits, like before going to sleep to guard against dreams, and before meals to curd the feeling of hunger.) This exercise can be carried out gradually and may include adding memorized prayers and resisting the temptation of getting the prayers over with.

11. Not limiting prayers to times of need. The main factor in praying is the love of God and not merely the fulfillment of needs. This exercise includes: prayers of thanksgiving, prayers of confession and admitting one's shortcomings.

12. Prayers for enemies and foes.

E. Exercises for Fasting:

This needs special wisdom and spiritual guidance and it includes:

1. The church fasting days: especially Wednesdays and Fridays, Lent, Holy Week, Advent, Apostles Fast, St. Mary's fast.

2. Special fasting days for specific events, whether personal or on behalf of others.

3. A period of abstinence from food: this differs from one person to another and it grows gradually. It starts by skipping breakfast.

4. The kind of food: not just eating special fasting food, but abstaining from fasting food that may be good enough to stimulate one's appetite.

5. The amount of food: fasting does not mean eating only special fasting food but reducing the amount to be eaten as well.

6. The amount of liquid intake is also cut down, but wisely. (Note the difference between winter and summer and the times of exhaustion versus resting periods.)

7. Not eating between meals (which is good for your health): requires the planning of visiting hours and meetings.

8. Not eating unnecessary types of food that you can do without, like sweets and some drinks.

9. Not showing that one is fasting.

10. Abstaining from some meals or certain kinds of food and giving the money instead to the poor, over and above what you ordinarily give.

Note: There are certain church fasts that are particularly strict, for example, during Holy Week, the church requires complete abstinence all day till sunset and then breaking the fast by eating only bread and salt. If you are unable to do so, then at least don't eat any dessert or appetizing food in addition to your abstaining from food for a certain period of time according to your ability.

CHAPTER 7

RETREAT

“It is good for a man to bear the yoke in his youth. Let him sit alone and keep silent.” (Lamentations 3: 27,28)

- A) Introduction**
- B) The blessings of retreat**
- C) What is retreat?**
- D) The servants need for retreat**
- E) How to spend the retreat?**
- F) Where to spend the retreat?**

A) INTRODUCTION

What is the cause of our mistakes and our getting astray from God? What is the cause of our spiritual and intellectual deviations? What is the reason for the many problems we face and our inability to solve them? What is the reason for all that?

The reason is that we do not know ourselves well. But where do I know myself? Where do I know myself naked of all the fake clothes which are covering its mistakes? Where do I know the truth which the Lord spoke of, "And you shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free." (John 8:32) But where do I see God?

Do I know myself amid the noises of this world? Can I see God amid people and tumult and clamor? No, I will never know myself unless I go away from people and see it in the light of God. There I will examine it. **I can never see God in His glory unless I go up on the mountain of transfiguration, after I leave the world, at my back, even temporarily and rise up on the mountain of meditation.**

Since his creation, the human being has not suffered from the whirlpool of life as he has in this present time. There are strong trends trying to pull him downward, toward the materialistic and carnal. This age is the age of speed, in which life is going very fast and everyone is trying to catch up with the trend, and woe is to him who is left behind!

Many wrong principles and incorrect theories, from the spiritual point of view, have penetrated our society and even our private life. We are not aware of them because we are accomodating with the speed of life. Do not think that the strong harmful trends are limited to the world, but rather you can find them also in the field of service. How many blessed personalities have been active at one time, but have perished during their service because they have forgotten themselves!

Poor is God's servant whom the devil of service deceives and keeps him running like a windmill and makes him think that this is acceptable unto God. Do not say that you have served and cast out devils in the name of Christ, lest you hear the fearful voice saying, "Go away, I do not know you."

Many of God's servants are void of grace. They use service and its different activities as a cover to hide their mistakes. They put on the beautiful clothes of Christ but what is most important is to put on Christ Himself, not His clothes. **"But put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts."** (Romans 13:14)

B) THE BLESSINGS OF RETREAT

We need retreat to examine ourselves and find out how much we have deviated from the truth and to correct what the spirit of this age has spoiled owing to conforming to this world.

If you want to know yourself in its reality, and the amount of fruits you bear being a branch in the true vine our Lord Jesus Christ, enter your room, close your door and sit quietly. Examine your deep self then you will realize how poor you are, "That you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind and naked." (Revelation 3:17) **You will see the branch of your life fruitless. You will see the axe put on the root of the tree and you will hear these divine words, "Every tree that does not bear fruit is cast in the fire."** You will see your sins made clear as you go to be judged. You will discover your hypocrisy and deceit in service, even if unintentionally.

You will be frightened by St. James' words, "Let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment." (James 3: 1) You will see everything in its reality, you will see yourself naked and your mistakes which you were careful to avoid. It is good that we see ourselves, in our realities. You will see yourself in God's image and you will discover how awful you are and that you do not resemble God at all, though you are created on His image and are called to be conformed to the image of His Son, the firstborn among many brethren. (Romans 8:29)

Discovering one's mistakes is a great blessing for it is the only means to get cured. One of the saintly fathers said, "Knowing one's self is the assured means to know God." But what is the significance of knowing myself? And what do I know about myself when I am alone? I know that it is full of sins and weaknesses. "For I know that in me, that is, in my flesh, nothing good dwells." (Romans 7:18) What is the significance of knowing my weaknesses? Once I know my weaknesses, I know God. "My strength is made perfect in weakness." (2 Corinthians 12:9) "For when I am weak, then I am strong." (2 Corinthians 12: 10) Once I realize how awful my sins are, then I become worthy of God's grace.

St. Peter said to Jesus, "Depart from me for I am a sinful man." (Luke. 5:8) Peter felt how bad his condition was. The Lord Jesus answered him, "Do not be afraid. From now on you will catch men." (Luke 5: 10) When did Peter deserve this great role of discipleship and apostleship and the great honor of service? This was at the moment he knew himself and said, "I am a sinful man." God's answer to his feeling was, "Do not be afraid. From now on you will catch men." Yes, from now, that is, from that moment. Therefore, knowing ourselves is the means to know God and we cannot reach this knowledge unless we get away from noise, in quiet and retreat.

In retreat, you will have a chance to be sorry, supplicate God and weep. How can you have this chance in the midst of the world?

The practice of retreat with the spirit of meditation is the most successful method to discipline one's self and to rebuild its personality according to high ideals. Retreat is a school for virtue, a lighted ladder that leads fast to God. It is the landing place of holy inspiration. The

voices of the trumpets and drums hinder the soft voice of the violin. Therefore, we cannot hear God's voice in the midst of the noises of the world and the wandering of the mind and the deceit of the senses.

If you put some unfiltered water in a container and leave it alone, it will become clean. Likewise, the soul, when it is alone, it gets purified and reaches holiness. The woman with the issue of blood had spent all that she had on doctors and became worse. But when **she went secretly** and touched the hem of Jesus' garment, she was healed at once. (Matthew 9:20-22) **Likewise, a soul suffering from the misery of sin and trying to get cured by any means cannot be cured. It needs to touch the Savior secretly, in a holy retreat, in order to be healed.**

You cannot get figs from thorns. Also, you cannot get true comfort for your soul as long as you are attached to people and concerned with the cares of life. Our Lord Jesus said, "When you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut the door..." (Matthew 6:6) Do you want comfort for your troubled soul and quietness for your heart? Do you want tears to cry for your sins? Do you want a pious soul saying, "My heart is stricken like grass, so that I forget to eat my bread. Because of the sound of my groaning, my bones cling to my skin." (Psalms. 102: 4,5) Do you want a pure heart which God witnesses that it is like God's heart? (Acts 13:22). **Do you want all that? Therefore, you have to follow David's advice when he said, "Indeed I would wander far off, and remain in the wilderness." (Psalms. 55:7). Apply this in your life by practicing retreat.**

John the Baptist, who was very holy and deserved the Lord's witness that he was the greatest among them that are born of women, fled to the wilderness since his early childhood and remained there till he appeared to Israel. That is he may not get defiled by the wickedness of this world, although he had been sanctified by the Holy Spirit while he was in his mother's womb !

John the Evangelist did not deserve to see the revelation except when he was alone in the island of Patmos. There he was in the spirit. (Revelation 1:10) **St Paul**, the great missionary of the church, after the Lord appeared to him on the way to Damascus, **went to Arabia** (the desert east of Damascus). He said, "I did not immediately confer with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went to Arabia." (Galatians 1: 16,17). There in the wilderness, he lived in a holy retreat with the Lord for a period of time, about three years, where he received from him everything necessary for his life and for building the holy church. He told the believers, later, "For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered to you." (1 Corinthians 11:23). Where did Paul receive these matters although he was not one of the disciples who followed the Savior and he did not see Him physically? When did he receive all the principles of faith which he preached, except in the holy retreat with the Lord in Arabia?

When **Elijah, the prophet**, was alone he used to eat the heavenly food. But when he lived with people, he was hardly able to get what to feed on. In the same manner, the soul, when all alone, will receive many gifts, which will be lost among people. **The children of Israel did not eat the Manna, the food of the angels, except in the wilderness! What did Abraham do to become a great nation?** He obeyed God's command to get out of his land and his father's

house. Do the same, my brother, get out of your land and your father's house to a holy retreat so God may bless you and make you a great nation. "Get out of your country, from your kindred, and from your father's house to a land that I will show you; and I will make you a great nation, I will bless you and make your name great (Genesis 12:1,2).

All the saints have followed the path of retreat and loved it . St Arsanius, the tutor of the kings' sons, is one of the greatest who loved that path. It was said that after he had fled from Constantinople and lived in Eskeet, he used to pray and ask God to guide him as what to do. After three years , he heard a voice saying : "Arsanius, be quiet, get away from people; be silent and you will be saved, for these are the veins for not sinning." He heard the voice for the second time so he went to a quiet place. Pope Theophilus 23rd desired to see St. Arsanius. He sent to ask his permission if he could open the door to him and meet him. He answered him, "If you come, I will open to you; and if I open to you, I can not close the door to anyone else. If I open the door to everyone, I cannot live here." Because of his great love to retreat, he used to stand behind a pillar in the church during Divine Liturgy so nobody can see him and he would not see anyone. This pillar is up to this day in the monastery of El-Baramous.

St. Anthony the Great said, "If the mind is away from people and gets in a quiet solitude, the Lord will strengthen it, then it may deserve to see the greatness of God and His power in His creatures."

Is there a better proof of the importance of retreat and its great blessings to the soul than the proof of the Lord Jesus Himself who loved it and honored it and used to retreat in the wilderness and on the mountains! "Now when it was day, He departed and went into a deserted place. And the crowd sought Him, and came to him and tried to keep Him from leaving them." (Luke 4:42)

Therefore, you, also go into the wilderness and seek Him and tell Him not to depart from you then sit at His feet in a holy retreat as Mary, Martha's sister, did. "Mary has chosen that good part which will not be taken away from her." (Luke 10:42)

How great are the blessings when we are in retreat with the Lord. At the beginning of the retreat, you hear a soft voice calling, "The Teacher has come and is calling for you." (John 11:28) At the end of the retreat, you will say in persistence, "It is good for us to be there." These are the feelings of love all dissolved in these words, then the soul will look up and see no man except Jesus only. (Matthew 17:1-8)

C) WHAT IS RETREAT?

Getting away from people is not retreat. A person may be living in the midst of the wilderness, yet still the world is living inside him. This person is not in a retreat! Retreat is emptying the heart and mind from all worldly cares.

Therefore, the correct meaning of retreat is that it is a retreat with God; the mind is void of all cares, the heart is void of every desire and movement except for the desire of the holy love to the Beloved Jesus. The place is empty without people where you can hear the voice of solitude. When the soul is quiet and has all these circumstances, then it cries from inside, “Amen. Even so, come Lord Jesus.” (Rev. 22:20) Then it hears the answer, “The Teacher has come and is calling for you.” (John 11:28)

Jesus did that when He retreated with the Father. “Everyone went to his own house. But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.” (John 7:53, 8:1) where He used to spend the whole night in prayer. He used to be in retreat with the Father. When His disciples had scattered, every man to his own, He told them, “**I am not alone because the Father is with Me.**” (John 16:32) Henceforth, the Lord Jesus has set for us the correct principle for the holy retreat. It is a unity with the Father. Let us learn how to get away from the hustle and bustle of the world, its noises and problems and be alone in a retreat, singing the beautiful song, "My Beloved is mine and I am his." (Song of Solomon 2:16)

Probably some will object to the idea of retreat saying that the Apostle Paul said, “Love does not seek its own.” (1 Corinthians 13:5) We answer saying, “But it is good for me to draw near to God; I have put my trust in the Lord God, that I may declare all Your works.” (Psalms 73:28) **It is a retreat for the heart with its Creator,** and a retreat for the soul with its Lover. This matter does not need a place but it needs quietness in the heart and looking inside yourself. People may surround your body not your heart; therefore, your heart can be in unity with God. David, the prophet, has experienced this beautiful exercise, in spite of all his busy schedule as a king. He said in the Psalms, "I have set the Lord always before me, because He is at my fight hand, I shall not be moved." (Psalms 16:8)

D) THE SERVANT'S NEED FOR RETREAT

Today's servants are poor. The word poor is not enough to express their condition. They lose their lives and peace in the middle of service. The secret of their being tired is that they are not quiet with themselves and they do not devote time to be alone with God. One of the fathers said, “Whoever devotes his life a living sacrifice to God, has to devote his time to the top of meditation in retreat.” **The servant needs to struggle spiritually more than others and needs Divine help. If we knew the value of retreat in our lives, we would surely realize its importance in the life of, God's servant.**

God's servant, who leads others, is in dire need to be filled and to correct his principles in the light of God. Mari Isaac said, “**If you do not sit down everyday for one hour with yourself and think what wrong you have done and when you fell, and straighten yourself, then do not count this as one of the days of your life. Love solitude, for therein is life for your soul. Through quietness, you see yourself “outside quietness” you do not see except what is outside. As long as you see others, you do not see yourself.**”

E) HOW TO SPEND THE RETREAT?

The only work you do during retreat is do nothing. The only thing you do is to think of your sins with sorrow and broken heart, your sins which separated you from God. These humble feelings may be the preliminary steps to the retreat. **Do not spend the retreat in preparing topics for service or think of the problems of service.** The devil of service wants you not to think of yourself. Spend the time of the retreat in quietness with yourself, **contemplating with God in prayers of love and eagerness to God, and in re-evaluating your principles in life.**

Put aside all your worldly cares. It is better to be fasting and abstaining from food, under the guidance of your spiritual father.

You may be unhappy at the beginning about the retreat, however, you should force yourself with patience and endurance. You should know that the retreat is not a period to spend then go back to your previous condition. But it is an opportunity for repentance and renewing your promises with God and training yourself with some spiritual exercises.

F) WHERE TO SPEND THE RETREAT?

For individuals, you may arrange for yourself certain times in a special place, suitable for you. It is better that this place be fixed so nothing would distract your attention.

However, for servants of the church as a group, centers for retreat, especially in big cities, should be built. These centers should be located in a quiet place, not away from transportation. Spiritual leaders should be appointed to manage these centers and special rules should be set to govern them.

CHAPTER 8

SERVICE

- A) What is service?
- B) God's servant
- C) Factors of strength in the life of a servant
- D) Spiritual leadership
- E) Avoiding service
- F) Everyone is invited to serve
- G) From Jerusalem to the uttermost part of the earth
- H) A final word

**“The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve,
and to give His life a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:28)**

A) WHAT IS SERVICE?

Service is not an art which one can acquire through mere practice as other types of fine arts may be. It is not a subjective study in which one can excel by personal effort. It is not a science like physical sciences. It does not start in seminaries, but it starts rather in the heart. Its school is the school of the Holy Spirit which inflames the heart, sanctifies it, teaches it everything, and reminds it of the words of the Lord Jesus. Moreover, it takes from what it has and gives to the individual.

Holy Love:

Service is a holy love which fills the heart of a person who loves God and has lived with Him, and who has thus tasted how good the Lord is. Therefore, he starts telling others, “Taste and see how good the Lord is.” It is a holy love; therefore, it is not limited to a definite place or to a definite time. Its message does not stop for a specific class or group of people. But rather it works with power in every place, in suitable and unsuitable times, in all human beings, regardless of race or class.

The goal of service is to let God’s love penetrate into every person who is deprived of it. Therefore, it destroys individualism and makes the individual change from loving himself to loving others. Therefore, it makes him exit from his private sphere to a broader one.

Spiritual Happiness:

Service is an important source of happiness. The Lord Jesus defined happiness when He said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). True happiness lies

not in possessing everything for myself, but rather in letting others share with me what I possess. One's happiness is not fulfilled when one has all he needs, but in letting others share what he is enjoying. Lakes are divided into two types: salty lakes and fresh water lakes. Salty lakes are closed and water pours into them, without an exit; that is they receive but do not give. However, fresh lakes receive and give water; therefore their waters are fresh.

Service gives the soul great happiness. The Lord Jesus clarified this when He illustrated the day of judgment by saying, “I was hungry and you gave Me food I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me, I was in prison and you came to Me” (Matthew 25:35, 36). Happy is the believer who gives spiritual food, rather than physical one. This leads a person to the Living Fountain, from which, when one drinks, he will never thirst again. Happy is the believer who visits a naked person and offers him clothes, not to cover his body, but clothes of righteousness which he lacked because of sin. Happy is he who visits a spiritually sick person and introduces him to Jesus to heal him like the four friends who brought their paralyzed friend to Jesus. Happy is he who visits an imprisoned man, who is in bitter captivity to tell him about the One who can liberate him from the dominion of sin. “Whoever commits sin, is a slave of sin. If the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed” (John 8:34, 36).

This is the message of the Lord Jesus: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me because He has anointed Me to preach the Gospel to the poor, He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed” (Luke 4:18). See how beautiful are Jesus’ comments. “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21). This is the essence of service and its blessings. This is the depth of spiritual happiness.

The Field of Service:

“The Word of God is not chained” (2 Timothy 2:9). Service cannot be restricted. Listen to the apostles Peter and John after the miracle of healing the paralytic and after the chief priests had commanded them not to teach or utter any word about Jesus. They replied courageously, “We cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20). In fact, this is the feeling of everyone who has experienced the Lord and tasted His love. It is impossible not to speak of the things he has seen and heard. What does the believer see or hear in his fellowship with the Lord? He sees and hears much. He sees what the physical eye cannot see and hears things which cannot be uttered. He has joy and peace which surpass all understanding. Didn't the Lord Jesus say, **“He who loves Me, will be loved of My Father and I will love Him and manifest Myself to him. We will come to him and make our home with him” (John 14:21, 23).**

Therefore, we find that everyone who is inflamed with the love of God cannot sit quietly or stop serving the souls for whom Jesus died. He says with David, “I will not give sleep to my eyes nor slumber to my eyelids until I find a place for the Lord” (Psalm 132:4, 5). He keeps searching for a place for the Lord and a dwelling for the God of Jacob in every heart in which the Lord would be pleased to be comfortable.

Truly the Word of God cannot be restricted. Serving the souls which the Lord loves, cannot be restricted. Everyone, whose heart is full of God's love, can always look for opportunities to serve the Lord in His brothers. He serves with his words, his teachings, his writings, his private life and his prayers for those whom he serves. He becomes like a magnet creating an atmosphere around him wherever he goes.

Anyone who does not believe in serving others, by any means, is not a true Christian because he is selfish. There is nothing worse in Christianity than a Christian who thinks only of himself; for loving one's neighbor is the fulfillment of the law (Romans 13:10).

As service cannot be restricted, it does not mind obstacles or dangers, or even death itself. On the contrary, death multiplies its power and helps it and makes its fruits plentiful. We feel this in the lives of those who preached, and were "slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held" (Revelation 6:9). They were given white clothes and were told to rest until their fellow servants were martyred like them. Look at the apostles who went on with their service with exceeding joy after they were persecuted and whipped. Moreover, listen to St. Paul saying, "Now I go bound in the spirit to Jerusalem, not knowing the things that will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies in every city, saying that chains and tribulations await me. **But none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received of the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of God**" (Acts 20:22-24).

Our Lord Jesus Christ was sent by God. "As the Father has sent Me, I also send you" (John 20:21). **He didn't come to be served, but to serve. His last commandment while He was on earth was concerning service and mission, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature"** (Mark 16:15). **Since that time, He has been commanding men, women and young people to preach and declare His Holy Name and love to all people.** He who refuses to obey God's voice to fulfill his duty in serving others and that he who does not share in extending the kingdom of God on earth is denying himself the great work for which Jesus came.

The Blessings of Service:

The New Testament has blessed service and the servant and has made him a means to bring hearts close to God, to renew souls and attract them to the kingdom of God. Didn't the Lord Jesus bless the peacemakers calling them the sons of God? They make peace between man and his Creator. The Son of God came to fulfill this great act. When we participate with Him, that is, when we serve to bring souls close to God, we deserve to be called the sons of God. **St. Paul clarified this when he said, "God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. We are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God"** (2 Corinthians 5:18, 20). **Service is a great work by which we reconcile men to their Creator. We continue the work which Jesus Christ began** and we fulfill His good will for the salvation of all people. "It is not the will of your Father Who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish" (Matthew 18:14).

In another verse, St. Paul explained the greatness of this service when he said, “**For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, you are God’s building**” (1 Corinthians 3:9). See the beauty in this expression with God! There are many comforting meditations in these words. **They show how honorable the message is which the servant of the Word of God has to fulfill. He works with God personally.** What an honor! It guarantees a carefree life for the servant who works with God. The servant is not responsible for the service, but God is. The servant only works with God.

We repeat that the word “servant” is great, and extremely blessed is his service. **This greatness is derived from our Lord Jesus Himself.** “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28).

Therefore, the Lord Jesus has rewarded his faithful servants with great honor in heaven and on earth. He said, “If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there my servant will be also. If anyone serves Me, him My Father will honor” (John 12:26). Daniel the prophet said, “Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament and **those who turn many to righteousness** like the stars forever and ever” (Daniel 12:3). When St. Paul was imprisoned in Caesaria and was taken to Felix the governor, he spoke about righteousness, and was told, “Go away for now; when I have a convenient time I will call for you” (Acts 24:25). The judge trembled in front of the prisoner! Also, Emperor Falnez trembled in front of St. Basil the Great and almost fell to the ground before him, but St. Basil helped him up.

B) GOD’S SERVANT

The Spiritual Level of the servant:

Wherever there is a faithful servant, there are plenty of fruits. **Before we discuss the topic of service, let us first define the qualities of a servant.**

A servant is a person who knows God, whose heart is full of His love, and who has tasted how good the life with Him is; henceforth he goes telling others about God. Therefore, he has to be at a higher spiritual level than those whom he is serving. He has to be pure in his thoughts, his behavior and his life in general. **Through his life, he shows to those whom he serves, the true way of life. He shows his superiority by his example more than by his words. His words enter the hearts of those who hear him if his life corresponds with what he says.** The prophet said, “O, Zion you who bring good tidings, get up into the high mountain” (Isaiah 40:9). This means that whoever teaches others about the heavenly matters has to leave the earthly levels and has to stand on a high mountain. **The servant has to be at a spiritual level higher than whoever he is serving.** It is obvious that the water flows from an upper level to a lower level, and not the opposite.

It is not the duty of the servant to teach others the Word of God but to lead them to it. It is not his duty to describe to them the Lord’s way, but to let them step in His way and

to accompany them. It is not enough that he give an overwhelming speech, but he must help them accept Christ. He should not be satisfied with doing some good deeds, but he must surpass the good deeds of those whom he serves. He must also be an example of virtue. The hand that cleans has to be clean itself to be able to clean, lest it makes other things dirty. **Therefore, the prophet says, “Be clean you who bear the vessels of the Lord”** (Isaiah 52:11). **Who are those who carry the vessels of the Lord except those servants who carry souls to bring them closer to God?** The Lord said to Ananias concerning Paul, “He is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings and the children of Israel” (Acts 9:15).

St. Paul emphasizes this in his writings to the Corinthians: **“We give no offence in anything, that our ministry not blamed. But in all things we commend ourselves as ministers of God: in much patience, in tribulations, in needs, in distresses, in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in fastings; by purity, by knowledge, by longsuffering, by kindness by the Holy Spirit, by sincere love, by the word of truth, by the power of God, by the armor of righteousness on the right hand and on the left”** (2 Corinthians 6:3-7). He wrote to his disciple Timothy saying, “Take heed to yourself, and to the doctrine. Continue in them for in doing this, you will save both yourself and those who hear you” (1 Timothy 4:16).

Notice how St. Paul is correlating the life of Timothy to his service among the people. Mere words emerging from an unrighteous soul cannot change the lives of those served and reach the depths of their souls. Mari Isaac said, **“The man who does not talk from experience is like a photographer who takes a picture of water on a wall, but that water cannot quench his thirst.”**

The Personality of the Servant:

The servant is a leader of the group which he is serving. Therefore, he should have a special character which makes him eligible for that leadership role. Besides his fellowship with God, he has to avoid all the spiritual mistakes which may be stumbling blocks to others. He has to be mentally and psychologically stable so that he may be an example to others and not a stumbling block. He has to avoid such weaknesses as anger and slips of the tongue which are apparent to others and may offend them.

Moreover, he has to command a certain mental ability besides his spiritual one. We mean that he should be intellectually active, able to discriminate, and wise so that he does not panic when asked unexpected questions. This is regardless of his general academic level, for there are illiterate people who are full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom and who are serving fruitfully.

Notice, also that the servant has to be a gifted speaker. The wise Solomon said earlier, “He who loves purity of heart and has grace on his lips, the king will be his friend” (Proverbs 22:11). It was said about Jesus, “All marveled at **the gracious words which proceeded out of His mouth**” (Luke 4:22). Also, the servants of the chief priests said, “No man ever spoke like this Man” (John 7:46). They were amazed not only by the topics He used to teach, but also by the way in which He spoke. What Matthew the Evangelist wrote after the

Sermon on the Mount is so wonderful: “When Jesus had ended these sayings, the people were astonished at His teaching, **for He taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes**” (Matthew 7:28, 29).

Do we have that authority? No doubt, Yes. It is written, “As many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God” (John 1:12). Not only that, but, through faith, we can do the works which the Lord Jesus did and greater than them (John 14:12). Peter was able to win three thousand souls to Christ through one sermon. In Iconium, Paul and Barnabas entered the synagogue and spoke until a great multitude of both the Jews and the Greeks believed (see Acts 14:1).

The Authority of the Servant:

Before the first mission, our Lord Jesus called His twelve apostles **and gave them power and authority and sent them to preach about the kingdom of God** (Luke 9:12). This is the secret of the power of the servant that this divine authority is his only weapon. The Lord commanded them not to carry staffs nor bag nor bread nor money (Luke 9:3).

The servant derives this authority from His Lord and Master who used to teach with authority, and not like the Pharisees. (Matthew 7:29) The teachings may be the same, but through the Spirit, it is alive and with authority in one servant whereas it is dead in the unspiritual person.

When Jeremiah tried to be excused from service because of his young age the Lord touched his mouth and encouraged him with some words saying, “I have put My words in your mouth. See, I have this day set you over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out and to pull down, and to destroy and to throw down, to build and to plant” (Jeremiah 1:9, 10). Also, **“I will make My words in your mouth fire, and this people wood, and it shall devour them”** (Jeremiah 5:14). Isn't this exactly what happened on the Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended on the apostles in the form of tongues of fire? This was followed by Peter's sermon which attracted three thousand souls to the faith. Isn't this the fire which Mari Efram the Syrian saw coming out from the mouth of St. Basil, the Great, during one of his sermons?

Can anyone dare to resist God's faithful servant or humiliate him? Listen to God's reply, “I will make My words in your mouth fire, and this people wood, and it shall devour them” (Jeremiah 5:14). **Didn't the Lord say about His servants that they are “A flame of fire”** (Hebrews 1:7).

The secret of success in service is this divine authority. **“For by fire and by his sword the Lord will judge all flesh and the slain of the Lord shall be many”** (Isaiah 66:16). **The servant overcomes them with the weapon of the spirit which is the Word of God** (Ephesians 6:17).

The Responsibility of the Servant:

The faithful servant feels that those whom he serves are his glory, his joy and the crown of his rejoicing (1 Thessalonians 2:19, 20). Also, they are the seal which proves how correct his mission is. No mission is acknowledged by official places unless it is sealed with an official seal.

Therefore, a faithful servant feels that he is responsible for the life of every individual whom he serves, a direct responsibility in front of God. His struggle does not stop until he “presents every man perfect in Jesus Christ” (Colossians 1:28).

What heightens this feeling of responsibility is the realization of the value of the human soul. The value of every soul is the blood of Christ for He died on the Cross to save it from this evil world. In as much as the soul is valued in the eyes of the servant, he multiplies his struggle and sacrifice for its salvation. For this reason, missionaries struggle and labor in their service and shed tears for every soul. Faithful servants follow their Lord Jesus, the Servant of salvation, who loves us and sacrificed His life for our redemption. He is the One who sought the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the Samaritan woman. He said, **“It is not the will of your Father who is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish”** (Matthew 18:14). **We notice this in the life of His apostle Paul,** who did not count his life dear until he had finished his course with joy and had completed the ministry which he had received from the Lord Jesus, namely to testify the gospel of the grace of God.

We notice the enthusiasm of this great missionary and this faithful servant in his speech to the Ephesians in which he said, **“I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare unto you all whole counsel of God. Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. Therefore, watch and remember that for three years, I did not cease to warn everyone, night and day, with tears”** (Acts 20:26-31).

Please pause and think of every word. Behind these words stands a great soul which realized and appreciated the value of the salvation of the Lord and the value of every soul for which the Lord has died. Notice his last words, “warn every one with tears.” This is an apparent characteristic in the life of St. Paul. He wrote to the church of the Colossians saying, **“Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus”** (Colossians 1:28).

In spite of the fact that this great apostle did not stay in one place but was constantly moving, he felt that he was responsible for every soul. Henceforth, he fulfilled his mission with tears. He was able to say at the end, **“I am innocent of the blood of all men”** (Acts 20:26). **“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race”** (2 Timothy 4:7).

St. Paul used to warn everyone with tears. No doubt, he knew his full responsibility. He was like His Master who knows his sheep and calls them by their names (John 10:3). No doubt, these tears which the apostle shed were accompanied by fervent prayers as is apparent from his letter to the Romans: **“For God is my witness whom I serve with my spirit in the Gospel of His Son, that without ceasing, I make mention of you always in my prayers”** (Romans 1:9).

We hear of many servants who never ceased when they saw one soul outside the flock deviating from God's way. St. Makarios, Bishop of Kaw, was one of those who would be seen weeping during his sermons. He had been given grace to see others' sins. Whenever he gave a sermon and saw some of his children not repenting, he would weep, for he felt it his responsibility to give an account of every soul.

We want to direct your attention to an important matter. **The outlook of the faithful servant and his prayers are not limited only to believers, but they extend to everyone, believers as well as nonbelievers. Jesus died for everyone so that all may enjoy the blessings of His salvation.** The servant cannot be quiet when he sees many sheep outside the flock, while the Great Shepherd of the sheep, our Lord Jesus Christ, calls everyone, **“Come, I will give you rest.”**

The Selection of the Servant:

Choosing servants is a difficult task in itself. Besides the qualifications that should prevail in the personality of the servant, **we have to emphasize that we cannot bring a person in whom the love of God is not rooted and who does not have a growing relationship with God and entrust him with a teaching service, regardless of his level of education, whether scientific or religious. This would result in double harm. Besides the fact that he would not benefit those who hear him and might even cause them to stumble by his behavior, he would also harm himself.** He would have two characters; one outside service and one while he is serving as he tries to look religious. The religious attitude of the servant should spring from his inner life. Such a double-faced person is a hypocrite. St. John El-Dargy said, **“Those who are still repenting, cannot be teachers.”** The teacher has his own dignity which does not fit in with repentance.

One of the fathers said, “If mothers deliver before their due time, they will fill the graves with dead persons, not houses with living ones.” This means that if the baby is born before its due time, it will be a dead fetus. Likewise, those who start serving before they are spiritually mature, might fill the world with talk, but the words will come out of their mouths dead. Solomon the wise said, “If the clouds are full of rain, they empty themselves upon the earth” (Ecclesiastes 11:3). This saying applies to teachers. Therefore, St. Eronemus explained this verse saying, “The clouds are the teachers. When they are full of water, they can water the earth. If they are empty, then they are “without water carried about by the winds, late autumn trees without fruit” (Jude 1:12).

Moreover, this matter needs God’s guidance through many prayers and fasting. This is what our Lord Jesus, the Great Teacher who knows everything, the Examiner of hearts, did before He chose the twelve disciples. He spent the night before, all alone in prayer (Luke 6:12, 13). **Also, His disciples did the same thing before choosing a disciple to replace Judas Iscariot.** They prayed saying, “You O Lord, who knows the hearts of all men, show which of these two You have chosen” (Acts 1:24).

The various needs for service in all St. Mark's See cannot allow us to compromise the principles of service. Our Lord Jesus Himself felt these needs when “He went about all Galilee teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease among the people” (Matthew 4:23) He noticed those needs when He saw the people harassed and helpless like the sheep without a shepherd. Those needs made Him say, “The harvest is truly plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest” (Matthew 9: 37,38).

In spite of the abundance of the harvest, our Lord Jesus Christ was very cautious in His divine wise plan, for He did not choose except a few disciples whom He charged with preaching. He taught us what to do toward the various needs of service: “Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest”. Hence, whenever we feel the urge to help our harassed and helpless brothers who are like sheep without a shepherd, we have to pray to the Lord of the harvest to send the needed laborers. No doubt, He will send them for He is eager to win the souls for whom He died.

The Preparation of the Servant:

After the servant is chosen, he must start preparing himself. **Preparing a true servant is not easy.** It is not enough that a Sunday School servant listens to some lessons and then starts teaching. It is not enough that a student in a seminary fills his mind with religious sciences.

The Period of Preparation:

We should not give anyone the responsibility of teaching without preparing him thoroughly. Our Lord Jesus, “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2:3), the Perfect in every good deed, did not start His service until He was thirty years old, even though He was able to teach when He was still a young boy. Didn't He overwhelm the teachers of the law when He was only twelve years old?

Our Lord Jesus did not send His disciples to preach immediately after His crucifixion and resurrection. But He told them to wait. He appeared to them and taught them for forty days till His ascension. Even after His ascension, He told them to wait till they receive power from above. Therefore, we should not wonder at how Peter's sermon on Pentecost attracted three thousand to the faith. **It is very important to know that service is not simply the art of speaking.**

Therefore, we should not hurry in giving a service to those chosen unless we prepare them thoroughly, regardless of the circumstances and the causes. Let's reflect on how Jesus Christ chose His disciples. **We are in a class of preparing servants. Jesus Christ Himself is the teacher. The students of that class are the twelve disciples. The visual aids are the miracles He performed. In spite of all that, preparing the students in that class lasted three years. The study was daily and included most of the day. In comparison we now prepare servants in a very short time!**

Let us see the great difference between the Lord and us. Christ, the Examiner of hearts, is the One who chose the disciples. He knew their readiness to carry His great mission. But we may find some youth who are kind and gentle and invite them to serve, without knowing their inside, which may be burdened with spiritual problems. We see the Lord Jesus spent three years preparing His disciples, while we take less time than that in preparing them, and what a great difference there is between the Lord and us! Some churches give the responsibility of service to some young people, feeling that this is a means by which to protect them from deviating away from the church. We are sorry to say that this logic is humiliating to God and causes many problems and weaknesses in the field of service.

How to Prepare The Servant:

We are concentrating here on how to prepare Sunday School teachers. The curriculum should include the following.

1 - The curriculum should include religious education such as Bible study, church dogma, rituals, church history, as well as spiritual studies. A teacher serves different levels; therefore, he needs to have a high religious education to answer those whom he is teaching, especially in our present time where many movements like atheism, materialism and liberalism are taking place.

2 - Secondly, the curriculum should address basic principles of psychology. This will help the teacher to understand the personality of his students and to deal with them. The servant should be instructed in, for example, the different stages of growth, the characteristics of each stage and how to apply them in giving the lesson in order to make it more appealing and interesting for the children. Also, the teachers should learn how to use visual aids.

3 - Furthermore, apprentice teachers should be given practical experience in service. They should be given the responsibility to teach under the supervision of older, more experienced teachers who would be able to direct them. **An important point we have to discuss here is the discipleship in the church.** The teacher should keep the spirit of discipleship no matter how long he has been serving. Christianity, in its deep roots, is based on the idea of discipleship. The Lord said to His disciples, before His ascension, **“Go, therefore and make disciples of all nations, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you”** (Matthew 28:19, 20). The early church followed its Master's command, therefore it was strong. The society of believers grew in number, virtue and knowledge. When we lose this spirit, we lose all the blessings which the Lord has stored in it.

Discipleship in its true meaning, is the individual service, which is the first foundation in the building of souls. The individual service is based on obedience and humility on the part of the student, and love and zeal on the part of the teacher. We can fulfill this idea in service meetings, where there is a chance for constructive benefit without discussing administration, which should be dealt with in a separate meeting. **What we really need is true discipleship and individual service, especially for beginning servants.**

Superficiality in Service

Superficiality, in itself, is a dangerous disease and a sign which does not lead to growth or progress. We mean superficiality in all domains of life. For example, superficiality in science does not lead to its advance, nor to new discoveries and inventions. Superficiality for the student does not lead to a prosperous future. Even if he passes the examination, his success does not qualify him to be one of the top students.

Nature, itself, teaches us this lesson, for the soil does not give its treasures except to those who dig deeply into it. We have never heard of a mine on top of the soil, but it is rather in the depths. Therefore, all those who live a superficial life are deprived of the blessings of the deep life. **If superficiality is so dangerous in carnal matters, what about in spiritual matters?** Our Lord Jesus commanded Simon Peter to go into the deep and cast his net. When he did that, he caught a great number of fish. Likewise, when we obey God's voice to be spiritually deep, we receive abundant blessings. We are not going to discuss superficiality in the spiritual life, but rather in service, which is, no doubt, a sign of superficiality in spirit.

Signs of Superficiality

One of the signs of superficiality in service is emphasizing the outside appearance, without looking at the points of weaknesses. Some leaders out of their zeal try to let as many of the youth serve and to establish new branches of service that have a definite place, time, servants, curriculum, students, etc. However, the life of those servants might be corrupt and they may not be prepared to teach the curriculum given to them. They might answer incorrectly some basic questions, not deliberately, but out of ignorance. They might cause problems which would require much effort to remedy. They might be stumbling blocks to the service. They may also be a bad example which may harm other branches carrying the same name.

The effort exerted in curing those servants is greater than the effort needed in preparing new righteous ones. We have to emphasize that this is a wrong procedure, when some servants try to establish new branches of service without any preparation and without calculating the cost. **The result is that these branches eventually die out, and even if they last for some time, they are like the flower of the plant which may wither away.** They may have a detrimental effect on the servants and those whom they served.

Superficiality in spirit may lead a person to wrongly evaluate himself in his relationship to God. Some are satisfied with the outside practices like prayers, spiritual readings, attending church, communion, fasting, even if they are done in a routine way. We are all required to live a perfect life, as the Lord Jesus said, "You shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). **Therefore, we are required to grow continually in grace, "Till we all come to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ"** (Ephesians 4:13). These words are written to everyone in the church. St. Paul made this clear when he wrote to the Colossians: **"Warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus"** (Colossians 1:28).

Some people measure success in service by superficial means like the number of Sunday School children, or the number of church attendants, or the number of those partaking in the Holy Communion. However, Jesus Christ said, “Do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rather rejoice because your names are written in heaven” (Luke 10:20). True joy is when the souls of those we serve, know God and have fellowship with Him. **There is nothing more dangerous in the church than superficiality. It is like the plant which grew on stony soil. It dried for it had no roots** (Matthew 13:5). We will discuss how to avoid superficiality in service.

C) FACTORS OF STRENGTH

The strength of the service as a whole is directly dependent on the servant’s spiritual condition. If he is strong, the service will be strong, and if he is weak, it will be weak. We shall not discuss all the spiritual factors in the life of God’s servant common to all believers, such as being regular in prayer, fasting, confession and communion, for these are taken for granted; but we shall discuss some factors which touch the life of God’s servant.

1 – Love:

Love should be the strongest factor that governs our private lives, our relationship with the Lord and our service in His vine. The devil entered the early church which St. Paul established in Corinth, and divisions resulted between the members. St. Paul consequently wrote his excellent words about love in chapter 13 of his first epistle to the Corinthians. He made it clear that love surpasses faith and the gift of prophecy, and that asceticism is useless without love. Even if one speaks in the tongues of men or angels and has no love, he is like a sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal. **Any work we do or virtue we accomplish, without the spirit of love, is rejected by God.** Strenuous effort and work without love create complaints. God hates any work we do with grumbling.

Love is a great power which cannot be rejected. Love raised the Son of God on the cross and attracted millions of people. Love attracted Saul of Tarsus at the doors of Damascus and made him a “prisoner of Jesus Christ.” It made him say, “The love of Christ surrounds us.” It converted the persecutor into a great apostle and missionary, after uprooting the hypocrisy of the Pharisees.

Love overcomes all obstacles in service. Love endures all difficulties. Love was the incentive for which the apostles struggled in order to spread the Good News. **Love changed the bitterness of persecution into joy. Jails could not imprison love and iron chains could not bind it. Love has fulfilled what great leaders could not accomplish. Love has reigned over the hearts and emotions. It has a special language which all people understand.**

When the believer's heart is full of love, he becomes zealous for the salvation and the happiness of others. He cannot be quiet when he sees his brothers and sisters committing sin. This was what made Daniel pray for himself and all the people (Daniel 9). This was what made Nehemiah enthusiastic in building the wall of Jerusalem, saying, "Let us build the wall of Jerusalem that we may no longer be a reproach" (Nehemiah 2:17). Jerusalem is the church and the society of the faithful. It needs zealous servants like Nehemiah. Our Lord Jesus wept over Jerusalem because it did not know the time of its visitation (Luke 19:41). Yes, the Lord did weep for his own people who did not accept Him. Likewise, His disciples and servants, in every place and age, should follow His example.

We often read in St. Paul's epistles about his great zeal for the salvation of others. He said to the believers in Corinth, "Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I do not burn?" (2 Corinthians 11:29). He said in his letter to the Romans, "For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh" (Romans 9:3). He was jailed in Caesarea and plots were conceived against him. Yet his main concern was for his brothers' salvation, not his own freedom from his enemies. When King Agrippa told Paul, "You almost persuade me to become Christian?" He answered, "I would, to God that not only you, but also all who hear me today, might become both almost and altogether such as I am, except for these chains" (Acts 26:28, 29).

We often read in St. Paul's letters about his service of tears. He told the priests in Ephesus, "Watch, and remember that for three years, I did not cease to warn everyone, night and day, with tears" (Acts 20:31). Tears are a sign of love, holy zeal, warm hearty emotions, and a language which many understand. It is a means which cannot be overcome whether by God or by men. The Bridegroom said to the bride, "**Turn your eyes away from me, for they have overcome me**" (Song of Solomon 6:5).

Since love is a great stimulus to service, it also saves us from a dangerous disease which has often weakened the church and religious communities; this disease is division. Some of the characteristics of love are, "Love suffers long, and is kind: love does not envy, love does not parade itself, is not puffed up, does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil, does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth, bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. **Love never fails**" (1 Corinthians 13:4-8).

We cannot completely cover a topic like love, its power and its effects, when discussing service. However, we ask the reader to pause on every quality that St. Paul mentioned, and to realize that we often do not abide by love. Rather we despise it and create fights and divisions with the excuse of defending some sound principles. But the soundest principle of all is not to fight and divide ourselves! Didn't St. Paul write, "You are still carnal. For where there are envy,

strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? For when one says, "I am of Paul and another, I am of Apollos", are you not carnal?" (1 Corinthians 3:3, 4).

Love is free from those who despise it. It has nothing to do with those who divide the church of Christ under the pretext of principles and spirituality, and who set up wars within the church, regardless of how pious they are. Those who do not know love do not know God, "for God is love."

2 – Faith:

God gave faith all the power to work and to give. The Bible is full of the promises of faith and its effects, and is full of stories of heroes of faith and of God's work through them. When Jesus sent His apostles on their first mission, He commanded them not to carry gold or silver or brass or sacks or two robes or shoes or a staff (Matthew 10:9, 10). Yet He granted them His divine authority to perform great deeds through faith in His name (Luke 10:17).

In contrast to the blessings of faith, unbelief is in itself a sin (Romans 14:23). Believing in God means putting our trust and confidence in God and His promises. Unbelief is an insult to God, for it is written, "Without faith, it is impossible to please Him" (Hebrews 11:6).

There will never come a time when God's promises do not have their first power and effect. When we hear about the struggles of the first missionaries, we wonder, asking what type of person had that kind of faith and could do the great deeds which they accomplished through faith? Anyone who has their faith can do better deeds than theirs. The Lord Jesus said, "He who believes in Me, the works that I do, he will do also; and greater works than these he will do" (John 14:12)-

Let us all beware of fear and doubt for they are the enemies of faith. According to God's commandment, Moses sent twelve men to spy the land of Canaan. Kaleb and Joshua were among those men. These men returned after 40 days. Ten of them stirred fear and a spirit of failure and weakness in the souls of the people and told them about the giants of the earth. However, Kaleb and Joshua said, "Let us go up at once and take possession, for we are well able to overcome it" (Numbers 13:30). **This is similar to what happens with us nowadays. Many believe that the evil in this world is too strong and that they cannot overcome it.** However, we are in great need of such people as Kaleb and Joshua, and the faith of the young shepherd David who killed Goliath by the power of the Lord of Hosts. God is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. He does not change.

The harvest is plentiful and the laborers are few. However, we do not need laborers who have the faith of devils, who believe and tremble, but rather true faithful laborers who are convinced of their mission and preach His Name and salvation with power and courage. The number of God's servants is not important, for Gideon overcame the army of the Mideans and the Giants with only three hundred men. It was written that the enemy was like locusts in number and their camels were as numerous as the grains of sand in abundance. Gideon had an army of 32,000 soldiers. He was frightened when he knew that the size of the Mideans was greater than his. Nevertheless, the Lord said to him, The people that are with you are too many

for Me to give the Midianites into their hands, lest Israel vaunt themselves against Me saying, “mine own hand has saved me.” Now, therefore, go and proclaim in the ears of the people saying, “whosoever is fearful and afraid, let him return and depart early from mount of Gilead.” And there returned of the people 22,000 and there remained 10,000. The Lord said unto Gideon, The people are yet too many, bring them down unto the water and I will try them for thee there. So he brought down the people unto the water and the number was reduced to 300. The Lord said, “By the three hundred men that lapped, I will save you” (Judges 7). This was what actually happened.

Let us purify God’s servants from those with the traits of doubt and fear, which some call wisdom. Let us believe in God’s promises and read about the heroes of faith who “through faith, subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, became valiant in battle, turned to fight the armies of the aliens” (Hebrews 11:33, 34).

At the wedding in Cana, when St. Mary noticed that they needed wine, she told the servants, “Whatsoever He says to you, do it” (John 2:5). We, too, need to obey the voice of faith till the end. The servants obeyed, and the Lord Jesus performed His first miracle. When we obey God, submitting in complete faith, we shall see miracles in our service, also.

3 – Being a good example:

Christianity, as a mission, has spread by good example more than by preaching. A good example is sometimes called the fifth gospel. Christians, through their love to God, their holy, fruitful life and their steadfast faith, glorified God. Through their meekness, they overcame evil and paganism, fulfilling God’s commandment: “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16).

Since this is the case with the ordinary members of the congregation, how much more important is it for God’s servants and leaders to be responsible and to present themselves as good examples to believers! Our Lord Jesus, the Great Teacher, Minister of the Holies, said, 'Learn from Me Also, “For their sakes I sanctify Myself” (John 17:19). The apostle Paul wrote to the believers, asking them to follow his example. He told his bishop, Timothy, "Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this, you will save both yourself and those who hear you” (1 Timothy 4:16).

The importance of presenting a good example in the life of God’s servant is evident from what the Lord said to Ezekiel the prophet, “I Myself will search for My sheep, and seek them out. **And as for my flock, they eat what you have trampled with your feet, and they drink what you have fouled with your feet**” (Ezekiel 34:11,19). The Lord means that God’s servants should live by what they teach. The Holy Spirit has illustrated this clearly by the words, “trampled with your feet” that is, trampled the teachings. **Those who are being served do not follow teachings so much as the example being set. They stumble as a result of what they see.** The Lord said through Ezekiel, “They ministered to them before their idols and caused the house of Israel to fall into iniquity” (Ezekiel 44:12).

There is nothing more dangerous to the church than a person who does evil and at the same time carries a holy position. Anyone who does not deserve to serve, should get away from it, fulfilling God's commandment, "But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea" (Matthew 18:6). **God's servant should let his teachings and sermons reflect his personal life. A servant was once asked, "How long did it take you to prepare that sermon?" He replied, "Forty years."** What he meant was that it was the summary of his past life.

4 – Prayer:

An obvious fact is that a Christian is dead spiritually if he neglects prayer. There is no other door through which he can receive divine help except by prayer. If this is the case with the regular believer, what about God's servant! The secret of our strength as believers is our prayers. The secret of strength in the life of God's faithful servants is the life of prayer. **Nothing but prayer makes the servant a true man of God and guarantees that his service is a "proof of spirit and power."** God's commandment to his disciples after his crucifixion was not to leave Jerusalem until they had received power from above (Luke 24:49). These words were a warning for them that they should not dare to serve without this power. God's promise to them was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost. The writer of the book of Acts showed how to receive this power when he said, **"These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication** with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers" (Acts 1:14).

The secret of the power of service is in the work of the Holy Spirit when it accompanies the Word of God. The way to obtain the Holy Spirit is through regular spiritual prayers. The power from above cannot be granted except by fervent prayers raised up above. **God's servant needs great power for his salvation and for his service to be effective.**

In the early church, service was accomplished through the power of prayer: "So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed" (Acts 19:20). **All problems were solved by prayer. Miracles were performed by prayer.** The fundamentals of faith were made steadfast by the power of prayer. The kings and governors who were against the church were defeated through the power of prayer.

When the disciples were attacked from all sides, they all prayed with one spirit saying, "Now, Lord, look on their threats, and grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word" (Acts 4:29). The result was that "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). Didn't the jail doors open by themselves for Peter for "prayer was offered to God for him by the church" (Acts 12:5)? Didn't the jail doors open in Phillippi, and weren't the chains of the prisoners loosed because of the prayers of Paul and Silas, causing the guard of the jail to believe (Acts 16:25-33)?

When the social service increased due to the increased number of believers, they did not forget prayer. When they gathered to discuss the matter, they said, "It is not desirable that

we should leave the word of God and serve tables. Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:2-4). **Notice the sequence here: giving ourselves continually to prayer comes before the ministry of the word.**

The faithful servant does not cease to pray for those whom he serves. In the meantime, he urges them to pray for him and for his service. Let us take as an example St. Paul, the faithful servant and the great missionary, who called us to be like him (1 Corinthians 11:1). These are his zealous words full of spirit: **“Night and day praying** exceedingly that we may see your face and perfect what is lacking in your faith” (1 Thessalonians 3:10).

“Therefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus, and your love for all the saints, do not cease to give thanks for you making mention of you in my prayers” (Ephesians 1:15, 16).

“For this reason, I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ from whom the whole family in heaven and earth are named, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith” (Ephesians 3:14-17).

“I thank my **God on every remembrance of you, always in every prayer** of mine making request for you all with joy. For God is my witness, how greatly I long for you all with the affection of Jesus Christ. **And this I pray,** that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and in all discernment” (Philippians 1:3, 8, 9)

“We give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, **praying always for you,** since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus, and of your love for all the saints. For this reason, we also, since the day we heard it, **do not cease to pray for you,** and to ask that you might be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding” (Colossians 1:3, 4, 9).

Let us meditate on St. Paul’s words to find out how faithful, successful service should depend on the power of prayer. Moreover, he urged those whom he served to pray for him: “Now, I beg you, brethren, through the Lord Jesus Christ and through the love of the Spirit, that **you strive together with me in your prayers** to God for me that I may be delivered from those in Judea who do not believe; **and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable** to the saints” (Romans 15:30, 31). **“You also helping together in prayer for us”** (2 Corinthians 1:11).

“Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints- 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 6:18, 19).

“Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving; meanwhile **praying also for us, that God would open to us a door for the word**. to speak the mystery of Christ” (Colossians 4:2, 3).

Finally, brethren, **pray for us that the word of the Lord may have free course and be glorified** just as it is with you" (2 Thessalonians 3:1).

5 - Self-Denial:

Self-denial is the strong foundation on which God’s servant should build his personal life and also his service. In St. Paul’s speech to the believers in Corinth, after comparing the old sports and the spiritual struggle, he said, “Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. And everyone who completes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainly. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, **lest when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified**” (1 Corinthians 9:24-27).

One wonders, how can this great missionary and apostle not be qualified? How can the one who attracted thousands to the Lord, lose his soul? However, this is a good reminder for us to watch ourselves and be careful for our salvation, to struggle till the end, even to the shedding of our blood, and to feel that God’s grace is everything in our lives. Even if we have been serving for several years, we have to feel everyday that we are just starting our service. **This is the strong foundation on which every servant should build his service.**

When God’s word came to Jeremiah the prophet to preach, he apologized because of his young age. God answered him with encouraging words and His divine promises after touching his mouth, saying: **“I have put My words in your mouth.** See, I have this day set you over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out and to pull down, and to destroy and to throw down, to build and to plant” (Jeremiah 1:9-10).

We have to feel that we are not worthy to serve, regardless of our academic qualifications and the number of years we have been serving. **We have to feel that every success, in our service and people’s admiration and appreciation, is due to the words that God has put in our mouth.** Let us follow St. Paul’s example as he said, “Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, **but our sufficiency is from God,** who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant” (2 Corinthians 3:5, 6).

The same matter was repeated with Isaiah, the prophet: “Then I said: Woe is me! for I am undone, because I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips. For my eyes have seen the King. Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a live coal which he had taken with the tongs from the altar **and he touched my mouth with it** and said, “Behold this has touched your lips, your iniquity is taken away, and your sin purged”. Also I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send and who will go to Us?” Then I said, “Here am I!, Send me.” And He said, “Go and tell this people” (Isaiah 6:5-9).

We hope that you feel that your lips are touched by the hand of the Lord, especially if you are regular in partaking of Jesus' Body and drinking of His Holy Blood which are a symbol of the live coal of the altar. Every time you serve and talk about God, feel that God has put His words in your mouth. Moreover, lift your heart to God asking Him to put His words in your mouth whenever you tell others about Him.

6 - Filled with the Spirit:

We have to remember always that God is spirit and all those who want to serve Him, have to be filled with the Spirit, in order to serve Him with the spirit. "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life" (John 6:63). The spirit is the substance of life. When the spirit departs, death approaches.

What God's servant says is not important, however, what matters is whether his words are accompanied by the power of the Spirit. The word comes dead out of the mouth of the servant who does not have a spiritual life. St. Paul said to the Thessalonians, "**For our Gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit**" (1 Thessalonians 1:5). Preaching is done through words, not ordinary words, but words accompanied by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The lack of the Spirit is the reason for our weaknesses. You may agree that preaching and teaching have increased, but the fruits have decreased. Sermons have become monotonous. The main reason for this is that since the teachers do not have life, the Word comes out dead. It is true that "For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword" (Hebrews 4:12). However, it needs a believer who uses it well. A strong sword needs a smart person to use it. St. Paul in his epistle to the Ephesians calls the word of God the "sword of the Spirit." How true is this expression! It is a sword, but it is associated with the word of the Spirit. The word without spirit is a dull sword that does not cut. It looks like a sword from the outside, but does not perform its duty.

St. Paul clarified this point when he told the believers in Corinth, " And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom **but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power**" (1 Corinthians 2:1, 4). **Let us pause at St. Paul's words, "In demonstration of the Spirit and of power."** These are the keys of successful service. **These are the secrets of the strength of the early church and of the spreading of the word.**

The enticing words of human wisdom are philosophy and logic. St. Paul, the philosopher of early Christianity, could have used logic and philosophy to talk with the believers in Corinth who were the grandchildren of the Greek philosophers. Yet he refused because the message of the kingdom does not spread by using logic and philosophy, **but by the demonstration of spirit and power. What is the demonstration of the spirit?**

The mind can convince the mind. The spirit can convince the spirit. When the spirit speaks, it does not use mechanisms of normal speech, but the special method of the

day of Pentecost. What kinds of philosophy and logic characterized St. Peter's words in his sermon on the day of Pentecost, such that all his listeners were pricked in their hearts and said, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37). Complete yielding on the part of the listeners, What shall we do? The answer of the apostle was "repent." This is the demonstration of the spirit through which the church has fulfilled the will of her Master and Savior to preach the Gospel to the whole world. **The demonstration of the spirit does not need any argument, "All your adversaries will not be able to contradict or resist" (Luke 21:15).**

What happened on the day of Pentecost after Peter's sermon was a proof of the work of the Spirit. The listeners did not argue this new call, nor did they ask for a special conviction. The reason was that the spirit worked in them and pricked their hearts.

St. Paul said that his ministry was through the demonstration of the spirit and power. The power is the same power which the Lord promised His disciples when He commanded them to remain in Jerusalem till they be endued with the power from on high (Luke 24:49). "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you" (Acts 1:8).

The world is now in the age of the intellect, an age that glorifies the mind and that attempts to subdue everything to its dominion. The mind of the world is bigger than its spirit. **The reason for the weakness in service and in the spreading of the kingdom of God is that we have forgotten the commandment of our Master and Teacher. We have started to serve with the intellect, not with the spirit. We have neglected the demonstration of the Spirit, with its power and effect. We have adopted the logic of the mind, accompanied by human philosophy and psychological methods!** The servants of this generation are all qualified with high educational degrees. Yet they are nothing compared to the uneducated fishermen of the Sea of Galilee who followed their Master to the end and waited in Jerusalem for the "Promise of the Father."

7 - Self-deprivation:

Self-deprivation is a Christian virtue which all believers should possess. By it we mean a disregard for the love of the world in all its forms. "Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whosoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God" (James 4:4). This virtue varies from one believer to the other. Self-deprivation may reach the extent of selling one's property, as was done in the early church. The apostles themselves illustrated their faith in this virtue when they said to their Master, "We have left all and followed You" (Matthew. 19:27). If self-deprivation is a Christian virtue required from all believers, then it is even more so from God's servants, both those who have completely devoted their lives and those who are volunteers.

The idea of self-deprivation is based on uniting the heart to the love of God. David, the king and prophet, asked God in one of his prayers, "**Unite my heart to fear Your name**" (Psalms 86:11). Often the heart is divided in spite of the commandment saying, "My son, give me your heart" (Proverbs 23:26). Also, "**You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart**" (Matthew 22:37). There is a great danger when the heart is divided and cares for other things which compete with the love of the Lord. The person starts to justify his behavior and his

weak love to God and begins to give many excuses. David the prophet said, “Do not incline my heart to any evil thing, to practice wicked works with men who work iniquity” (Psalms 141:4). May our hearts be all united and perfect toward God’s love. **“For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show Himself strong on behalf of those whose heart is loyal to Him”** (2 Chronicles 16:9).

It happens sometimes that after a volunteer servant graduates from college and starts working, he looks for an overtime job. Hence, he occupies the time in which he previously used to serve the Lord. This youth keeps struggling in the world till all his spiritual desires are dissolved by the society in which he lives.

Many are deceived by the world’s glittering temporary positions. There is no doubt that they have deviated from the life of self-deprivation which is appropriate for God’s servants. **We have to clarify that we are not against ambition.** This is very appropriate for regular Christians; however, we are talking here about a small group of people whose hearts are inflamed with God’s love so they want to serve His children. There is no doubt that God compensates those faithful servants who preferred His service to the love of high positions and much money.

There are some devoted servants who do not experience self-deprivation. They may have forsaken their jobs for the sake of service, but they may not have given all their love and hearts to God. We should tell them the same words that Peter said to Ananias and Sapphira, **“Tell me whether you sold the land for so much? While it remained, was it not your own?”** (Acts 5:8, 4). Before devoting your life to God, was it not your own? Did you sell the world for so much? You have not forsaken all the love for the world, but you have kept some for yourself! Sit with yourself and examine your vows and past promises before devoting your life to God’s service and remember whether you have kept some of the price of the land, which is part of your heart and part of your life.

In the miracle of feeding the multitude, the disciples told the Lord, “We have here only five loaves and two fish.” His answer was, “Bring them here to Me” (Matthew 14:17, 18). Then the Lord took the five loaves and two fish and blessed them. So everyone ate and was filled and had leftovers. **God asked them to give all that they had, and they gave it all. This allowed the miracle of the blessing to happen. What would have happened if one of the disciples had kept some for himself, because of lack of faith?**

The experience of self-deprivation is a profound one which gives the faithful servant spiritual power, complete dependence on the Lord and courage in His service. Concerning financial matters, it gives him the ability to rise above the level of material matters, which often create problems and hampers the growth of his service.

8 - Love and compassion toward those we serve:

There is no doubt that love and compassion from God’s servant to those whom he serves build them up spiritually, for love and compassion are the characteristics of true Christianity. **We have seen the Son of Man's view towards sinners.** He considers them sick and in need of

treatment. He attracted millions of people by His love and His kindness. Rightly, St. Paul said, "Love edifies" (1 Corinthians 8: 1). Jesus was a friend to the publicans and sinners; He ate, drank and sat with them. For this reason the scribes and Pharisees objected to his doings. It was written that, "He went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every sickness and every disease among the people. But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion on them, because they were weary and scattered like sheep having no shepherd" (Matthew. 9:35, 36).

Love and compassion are main traits of God's disciples. St. Paul said, "**But we were gentle among you, just as a nursing mother cherishes her own children. So, affectionately longing for you, we were well pleased to impart to you not only the Gospel of God, but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us**" (1 Thessalonians 2:7, 8). In another place, he told the Galatians to be kind to sinners: "Brethren, if a man be overtaken in any trespass, **you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness**, considering yourself, lest you also be tempted" (Galatians 6:1). Being severe to a sinner does not win him. On the contrary, it drives him away from God and the church. "A servant of the Lord must not quarrel, but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, **in humility correcting those who are in opposition**, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth, and that they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him at his will" (2 Timothy 2:24-26).

Absalom, the Son of David, was thrown away from his father, the king, for he had removed his father from the throne. He despised the fatherly love and even sought his father's life. However, David, did not change his love to his son. When David asked his soldiers to go and fight Absalom, he told them, "Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom" (2 Samuel 18:5). **David is analogous to our Lord Jesus and Absalom to the sinner.** The Lord has the same feelings toward sinners. As He is very kind to them, we should be like Him. Joab, the brutal old man, killed Absalom in spite of David's commandment. There are many like Joab. While Jesus is asking us to treat sinners kindly, there are some who, like Joab, kill them with brutality. The Lord Jesus is saddened by this as was David over his son Absalom's death.

9 - Wisdom and flexibility:

How sweet is the word "wisdom" and what a supreme blessing is it? "For wisdom is better than rubies, and all the things one may desire cannot be compared to it" (Proverbs 8:11). Christ was pleased to be so called. "But we preach Christ ... the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Corinthians 1:23, 24). "Christ in whom are hidden **all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge**" (Colossians 2:3). Therefore, it is not strange to find that our Lord Jesus Christ "increased in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and men" (Luke 2:52). He commanded us to be wise: "**Be wise as serpents**" (Matthew 10:16). He promised His children and disciples wisdom during difficult times saying: "**For I will give you a mouth and wisdom** which all your adversaries will not be able to contradict or resist" (Luke 21:15). How wise was His behavior when He answered those who wanted to entangle Him with the government, "Render therefore to Caesar the things which are Caesar's, and to God the things which are God's" (Matthew 22:21).

We must admit that many of our problems in church and in service are caused by unwise behavior. We stand inflexible, believing that the truth is on our side .The result is division and failure. This does not mean, however, that we should not live by values. We have to be wise for the unity and salvation of souls. This is what we feel clearly in St. Paul's sayings, **"For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; and to the Jews, I became as a Jew that I might win Jews, to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law, to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under the law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law; to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. Now this I do for the gospel's sake, that I may be partaker of it with you"** (1 Corinthians 9:19-23). This makes it clear that the apostle did not offend all these groups which he served. He did not criticize their beliefs or opinions. By his great wisdom, he led them all to the faith.

Two situations illustrate these words, one with the Jews and the other with the pagans. In spite of his objection to the idea of circumcising the Gentiles, he acted according to the opposite view with Timothy. **"He took him and circumcised him because of the Jews** who were in the region, for they knew all that his father was Greek" (Acts 16:3). Likewise, **in Athens, the center of philosophy, St. Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said,** "Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things, you are very religious; for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription **"TO THE UNKNOWN GOD."** Therefore the One whom you worship, Him I proclaim to you: "God who made the world and everything in it." (Acts 17: 22-24). Surprisingly, St. Paul who said these words is the man about whom it was written, "While Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw the city was given over to idols." (Acts 17:16).

Wisdom is a basic Christian trait which God's servant should possess. When the book of Acts describes how helpers (i.e., deacons) were chosen for the apostles, one condition was that "they should be full of the Holy Spirit and of wisdom" (Acts 6:3). This was shown to be accurate when the opposition disputed with Stephen (the first deacon) and were unable to resist the wisdom and spirit with which he spoke (Acts 6:10).

Wisdom is a commandment to all apostles. St. Paul, "a wise master builder" (1 Corinthians 3:10), commanded to "walk in wisdom toward those who are outside" (Colossians 4:5), and to teach one another "in all wisdom" (Colossians 3:16). He also told the Corinthians, "But be that as it may, I did not burden you. Nevertheless being crafty, I caught you with guile" (2 Corinthians 12:16). St. James, the apostle, urged the believers to obtain wisdom when he wrote: **"If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him"** (James 1:5).

No doubt wisdom is one of the most important principles of service. It goes side by side with the winning of souls. Solomon the Wise said, "He who wins souls is wise" (Proverbs 11:30). Our Lord Jesus clarified this when He compared fishing to winning souls (Luke 5). Fishing needs wisdom and care as does winning souls.

God's servants need to be flexible and wise, not with the wisdom of this world which St. James the apostle described as "earthly, sensual, demonic", but the wisdom which is from above and which is "first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits" (James 3:15-17). Yes, we are needful of flexibility and divine wisdom. Many problems are created in service because of lack of wisdom. Therefore, we warn the leaders of Sunday School not to leave matters to the youth who lack even the wisdom of this world, due to their young age. Job said, "**Multitude of years should teach wisdom.**" (Job 32:7).

10 - Concentrate in your service:

One of the important factors for God's servant to acquire strength is to focus his efforts in his service. This is a concern for both the devoted servants and for the volunteers. There are many servants who, due to their zeal for service and for the salvation of souls, serve in more than one field and in more than one place. The result is that they often lose concentration, which leads to weakness and superficiality, not only in service, but also in the lives of those servants themselves. Often, diversity in service is at the expense of the private spiritual life of the servant, unless the number of assistants is increased.

There are twelve hours in the day, and one's time and efforts are limited. Service is not restricted to those who devote their full time to it, but also includes lay people. These may be employees or students who should be honest in fulfilling their duties to God, society, and their conscience. When we neglect our duties, we "hinder the gospel of Christ" (1 Corinthians 9:12). Time is limited for many servants and must be used wisely. They should not widen their service, thus neglecting their spiritual growth. One should be careful to follow the middle road.

The Lord of Glory said, "For what is a man profited if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Matt. 16:26). If I serve the souls of the whole world at the expense of the salvation of my soul, I will gain nothing. Therefore, watch yourself and put St. Paul's words before your eyes: "I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should be disqualified" (1 Corinthians 9:27).

Hence, it is possible that a servant who preaches the Gospel, may be rejected at the end, because of his personal negligence. Let us remember what our Lord Jesus said: "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). This expression, "I never knew you", means that those servants did not have a personal relationship with God, and did not know Him privately. Who is that servant who puts his body under subjection, lest he becomes disqualified? He is St. Paul, the teacher of all the universe and its missionary, who ascended unto the third heaven and saw things which no one can express!

Our Lord commanded us to love our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:39). He did not command us to love our neighbor more than ourselves! It is good if we love him more, but in reality we want to escape from ourselves! If I unknowingly neglect visiting a sick person or helping others, I would have an excuse. **But what is my excuse if I neglect my soul, of which I**

am conscious of at all times? What answer shall I give God? **Therefore, be careful and watch over yourself. Never shirk your responsibility to yourself, but be honest until death so that you may receive the crown of life.**

The Lord Jesus spent many hours with the multitudes teaching them and performing miracles. He would spend the whole day serving. But do not forget that the Lord Jesus is different from any other person, for He used to spend the whole night in prayer (Luke 6:12). We can't reach the spiritual level of our Lord Jesus which would enable us to spend the whole day in service and the whole night in prayer!

Some servants fall into a state of deviation because of their love to service, and their zeal for the salvation of souls. **We may call this "the devil of service."** Service rules every thought of such a servant. He does not think any more of himself, but of those whom he serves. Whenever he listens to a speaker and likes his talk, he copies his words, not for his own benefit, but because they can be appropriate for a topic, for a sermon or a youth meeting or a Sunday School class! Likewise, whenever, he reads a book, his only concern is to try to find useful points for a topic; thus, he forgets himself.

My dear brother, this is deviation, so be careful. **It is necessary that what we teach others should spring from our personal experience.** There is nothing wrong in listening and enjoying, or reading and admiring what you read. However, your main concern should be for your own benefit. Only when your own soul has come closer to Christ can you spontaneously help others.

11 - Courage in service:

There are many situations which require wisdom in a faithful servant. There are other situations which necessitate courage. Nothing makes God's servant lose courage more than weak faith and hypocrisy. When a man of God is dead to the world and has strong faith, he is ready to endure all difficulties, even to death, for witnessing to the truth. **We have seen how Elijah the prophet rebuked King Akhab** not caring for the king's authority. The end result was that Elijah ascended alive up to heaven in a fiery chariot while dogs licked up Akhab's blood as foretold by Elijah. **Likewise, John the Baptist rebuked king Herod** for transgressing the law. The first scene of this tragedy ended by the severing of John's head, which was worth more than half of king Herod's kingdom. However, the story has not ended, for up until now John's voice is still heard rebuking the sinner, crying, "It is not lawful to you."

All the prophets, apostles and faithful servants who received their heavenly mission were courageous for they were not afraid of death. The Lord Jesus commanded His disciples, "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28). The Lord told Isaiah, the prophet, "Cry aloud, spare not; lift up your voice like a trumpet, tell my people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins" (Isaiah 58:1). He told Ezekiel, the prophet, "And you son of man, do not be afraid of them, nor be afraid of their words, or dismayed by their looks, though they are a rebellious house. You shall speak my words to them, whether they hear or whether they refuse, for they are rebellious" (Ezekiel 2:6, 7).

If the faithful servants had not been courageous in every generation, the truth would have been lost amidst all that is vain. How many servants were martyred **“for the word of God and for the testimony which they held”** (Revelation 6:9). The blood of those martyrs has watered the seeds of faith as they grew into a large tree under whose shade we are now sitting.

When king Nebuchadnezzar obliged the people to abandon God's worship, the three youths answered him courageously, **“O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up”** (Daniel 3:16-18). The result of that challenge was that they were thrown in the fiery furnace whose heat was increased sevenfold. Nevertheless, since the Lord was with them, the fire did not hurt them, and God's name was glorified.

We feel this courage in the life of the apostles and their writings. When St. Paul was warned not to go to Jerusalem for there was danger to his life there, he answered courageously, **“What do you mean by weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die at Jerusalem, for the name of the Lord Jesus”** (Acts 21:13). St. Peter said, **“Do not be afraid of their threats, nor be troubled. But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts”** (1 Peter 3:14, 15).

The faithful servant must explain the word of truth rightly, with no hypocrisy. It is a great sin if we do not say the truth in spite of our knowledge of it. Be sure that God is with you, and do not commit the sin that **king Saul** committed. He confessed to Samuel, the prophet, saying, **“I have sinned for I have transgressed the commandment of the Lord and your words because I feared the people and obeyed their voice”** (1 Samuel 15:24). No wonder God rejected him **and gave the kingdom to David** who often praised God in his psalms saying, **“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?”** (Psalm 27:1).

The faithful servant must be sure that the Lord is with him and be confident in God's power, care and promises as long as he dwells in the secret place of the most High and abides under the shadow of the Almighty. The Lord said, **“Fear not, for I am with you, be not dismayed for I am your God. I will strengthen you, yes, I will help you. I will uphold you with My righteous right hand”** (Isaiah 41:10).

D) SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP

Spiritual leadership is a divine gift which the Lord grants to a person who has been made especially ready by deep faith, complete obedience, strong love, and who has sacrificed worldly glory and everything material. **“But what things were gain to me, these I counted loss for Christ”** (Philippians. 3:7).

Spiritual leadership **is not inherited, nor is it obtained through an important social position. It is not attained by seeking false knowledge, or the best seats in church, but by counting all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ.**

Spiritual leadership is not given without regard to those who occupy positions of religious leadership, but it is given only to suitable persons. Where the lion dwells, that is its den, but if the lion leaves that place, the place has no value anymore.

In Egypt, Joseph was only a slave in Potiphar's house. Yet he found grace in his master's eyes, and became a leader in his house. While he was a slave in body, he was free in spirit. As a result, he was not enslaved by sin, even though he was unjustly imprisoned. Leadership followed him even into prison. "The Lord was with Joseph and he was a successful man" (Genesis 39:2). In this manner he eventually became the second man after Pharaoh in command over Egypt, with leadership over all the country.

St. Paul on his way to Rome to be judged in front of Caesar's court was a prisoner in the ship under guard by Roman soldiers. The sea raged and the waves rose higher until everyone was frightened. St. Paul stood, as their leader, saying, "Men, you should have listened to me, and not have sailed from Crete and incurred this disaster and loss. And now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but of the ship. For there stood by me this night an angel of God to whom I belong and whom I serve saying, "Do not be afraid, Paul, you must be brought before Caesar and indeed God has granted you all those who sail with you" (Acts 27:21-24).

Moses, whom Pharaoh's daughter adopted and "was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was mighty in words and deeds" (Acts 7:22), did not become a spiritual leader in Pharaoh's palace but in the Sinai desert: "He refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt" (Hebrews 11:24-26). **Let us compare now Moses' position before he was given leadership from God and his position later, after God appeared to him in the burning bush.** In his former position, we see physical zeal and human methods. We see murder, fear and failure. But in the latter position, we see spiritual power and divine awe. We see a heavy tongue speaking clearly. We see brave acts and miracles and the first organized evacuation in human history. In the wilderness, we see great wise leadership.

Jeremiah the prophet was called when the Israelites were in the worst of times, when sin, hypocrisy and superficial worship prevailed. It was not easy for Jeremiah under such circumstances, when his society was evil and full of stumbling blocks, to get any good response to his mission! The Lord called him and when he apologized, the Lord encouraged him and gave him leadership over His people. Then He stretched His hand and touched his mouth saying, "See, I have this day set you over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out and to pull down, and to destroy and to throw down, to build and to plant" (Jeremiah 1:9-10).

Hence, we see that spiritual leadership is not achieved by attending service meetings, nor by reading books, nor by imitating other leaders, but only through God. That is what the Lord did with both Elijah and John the Baptist, who were feared by King Akhab and King Herod, respectively. Also, Samuel, a young boy, was given the words of prophecy, and David, the young shepherd, became a king.

God is not biased. He foresaw in them complete obedience, great faith, strong love, and readiness for work. He consequently prepared them for the great role of leadership. **He said to Joshua, “This day I will begin to magnify you in the sight of all Israel, that they may know that, as I was with Moses, so I will be with you”** (Joshua 3:7).

A spiritual leader does not lose his leadership because of old age, for there is no retirement in spiritual leadership. Nor is there old age in spiritual life, that is unless we forsake God’s love and our fellowship with Him.

E) AVOIDING SERVICE

Earlier we spoke about the importance of focusing in service and we advised not to widen the field unless there are enough servants. We would like to discuss now the other extreme, which is the avoidance of service. Both are considered deviations. If someone, who has the spiritual, intellectual, and cultural capabilities refuses to serve, he is doing wrong. **Some of the excuses given for avoiding service follow.**

1 - The Desire for Spiritual Growth:

We can not distinguish between a person who is growing in his spiritual life and a person who is not growing. Growth is associated with the spiritual life and there is no limit to it. We keep growing until we die. **A person who avoids serving until he feels he has grown spiritually will never serve, for there is no definite measure to tell him he has matured.**

Moreover, the more a person grows spiritually, the more he will discover his mistakes and may feel that he is the worst of sinners. That is how the saints look at themselves. Therefore, we have to proceed to serve God without pride, as long as we have the necessary capabilities. **We should never forget our spiritual growth during our service, for the spiritual growth of the servant means the growth of the service itself.** We must do one and not abandon the other. The lazy servant, whose master had given him one talent, which he then buried, was punished because he had not gained anything, not because he had spoiled the talent (Matthew 25). As long as God has given us special talents, we must win others for the Lord. St. Augustine said, “We have to serve others with the spiritual gifts that God has given us.” Let us be zealous for our brothers and their salvation. St. Paul wished to be deprived of Christ for his

brethren, his kinsmen according to the flesh (Romans 9:3). St. John Chrysostom explained this deprivation as his readiness to stop the divine conversation with God for the sake of his brothers.

We must stress the point that service itself gives growth and consolation to the servant. St. Paul described the Word of God as “Living and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword” (Hebrews 4:12). This beautiful illustration shows the effectiveness of the Word of God. The two-edged sword is a symbol of power. It influences both sides: the speaker (or the servant), and the listener (or the ones served). **Never think that when you serve, you give and do not take. You take as much as you give.** St. John Chrysostom made this clear when he said that “The words of our Lord Jesus “Give and you will be given,” can be applied to those who care for the salvation of others.” In as much as you are faithful in your service, the Lord will comfort you. Moreover, service pushes us to care for ourselves spiritually.

2 - A Feeling of Unworthiness:

No one denies the honor of service and what it requires by way of preparation. It carries responsibilities in front of God, our consciences and the church. However, we should never be afraid, for we have not received the spirit of bondage to fear, but the spirit of adoption (Romans 8:15). We do not deserve anything from God’s grace and His blessings, but we have received all our worth in the Savior’s blood. The feeling one may have of deserving any grace indicates a sin of pride due to a feeling of self-consciousness. The feeling of unworthiness which stems from humility, is an effective factor in the success of service, on the condition that it is without despair. This feeling of worthlessness becomes a fruit of humility with its abundant blessings. **Let us distinguish between the feelings of unworthiness which accompany self-denial and the those due to pettiness.**

After the miracle of the draught of the fish (Luke 5), Simon Peter felt the burden of his sins and his unworthiness for the coming of the Lord onto his boat. Therefore, he cried, “Depart from me, **for I am a sinful man, O Lord**” (Luke 5:8). The Lord’s answer was, “**Do not be afraid. From now on you will catch men**” (Luke 5:10). Entrusting him with service came from his feeling of unworthiness. It is beautiful to feel all times our weakness and our unworthiness to carry the vessels of the Lord, to preach to others the word of salvation and to feed the living sheep. This feeling, though, must accompany one of zeal for our brothers who are living in the darkness of sin and in the shadow of death and a desire to extend the kingdom of Jesus Christ on earth. We must be sure we know that no one is without sin, even if he lives only one day.

We must struggle along two roads at the same time, our life with God and our service to others with the feeling of how honorable it is to serve and how unworthy we are to do it. St. Paul’s words should encourage us, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9).

3 - Waiting for God’s Call:

Some people avoid service (especially the service of complete devotion in its different forms) with the excuse that they are waiting for a clear call from God. Meanwhile, they

cannot define this call and it becomes vague in their minds. Some may visualize this call as an extraordinary scene or a heavenly revelation in a vision, or a dream, or a heavenly voice.

We do not deny that this has happened with some people, but it is not the rule. God does not always reveal his will through angels, visions, or dreams to a person who prays for a certain matter. Still there are many other ways by which we know God's will. St. Paul said, **“God, who at various times and in different ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken unto us by His Son”** (Hebrews 1:1, 2). God has different ways to speak to us. He does not speak to you in the same manner He speaks to me. He does not reveal to me a certain matter in the same way He reveals it to another person. There are certain people who, due to their spiritual condition, cannot withstand visions or the sight of angels. Furthermore, if the devil finds that a person trusts in this method of communication, he may use it to deceive him.

The rule is that whenever somebody requests us to perform a certain service and we feel the desire to fulfill it, we pray for it and ask others to pray with us. We may even ask the priest to officiate liturgies dedicated to it. If after all that the thought persists to fulfill the service and we feel lasting comfort about it, then it is a proof of God's acceptance of that matter. This is understood on the condition that it does not conflict with God's commandments or with a teaching from the Church's doctrines.

When we speak about prayer and comfort, we have to understand the factor of time. That is, we do not pray just for a day or two and we say that we have prayed enough. We have to pray for a longer period of time and persist in prayer especially in matters such as devoting one's life to God. Moreover, we should not depend on our own thoughts alone. We must also take the advice of spiritual persons, whose correct teachings and faithful advice we are sure of.

We must clarify an important matter: we are all invited to serve. A supernatural proof is not required to verify what is already established. People are of two kinds. Some have the desire to serve while others are obliged to do it. We clearly see this in the lives of two prophets. For example, when Isaiah heard God's voice saying, “Whom shall I send and who will go for Us.” He replied, “Here am I! Send me” (Isaiah 6:8). But Jeremiah was obliged to go, after he said humbly, “Ah, Lord God! Behold, I cannot speak, for I am a youth” (Jeremiah 1:6).

We have to mention that the idea of God's call has a certain desire behind it. For example, we all do things, like get marriage, find a job, travel abroad to obtain scientific degrees without asking for God's call! However, in God's service, specifically in devoting one's life, we ask for a clear strong proof for God's call. It is obvious that in the former case, we do not insist on God's call for we fulfill a favorite desire in our souls.

4 - Family Hindrances:

Sometimes, the family hinders one's service. No wonder, the Lord Jesus said, “A man's foes will be those of his own household” (Matthew 10:36). **We point here to two factors related to the family, which are marriage and parents.**

It is strange that marriage is one of the factors which hinders service. We do not blame marriage, for it is a holy sacrament that God has sanctified and blessed. But we speak of the marriage that pulls the servant outside the sphere of service. We blame the servant who changes the style of his life because of marriage. Marriage should become a blessing to the servant and a help in his service. He may undertake new responsibilities in the sphere of service. Marriage should not become an excuse to neglect service.

A wife may become a great blessing to the servant in his service. Isn't she his partner in life? Why doesn't she share with him his service? If she had once been a servant, she could help him in the field which suits her. If she has the gift of service she could help in educational services or in the guidance of youth or women. She could contribute to the social services, like visiting widows and the poor or in doing manual work like sewing for the needy. Marriage is a blessing which should lead the wife to believe in the message of service, so she can help her husband in carrying the tasks of life and service. It is better for servants who are thinking of marriage, to choose their wives from among women interested in service. Hence marriage becomes an encouraging factor to their service and not a hindrance to it.

About the parents: We all love and obey our parents according to God's commandment. But if this love conflicts with God's love, then we have to follow God's way, according to what the Lord Jesus said: **"He who loves father or mother more than Me, is not worthy of Me"** (Matthew 10:37). Also, He said to His Mother, St. Mary, when she found Him in the temple among the teachers, "I must be about my Father's business" (Luke 2:49). **If there is a conflict between our obedience to our parents and our obedience to God, we should give priority to God. "We ought to obey God rather than men"** (Acts 5:29). This does not mean that getting parents to understand is impossible, for everything can be solved through love and prayer. We have seen many cases where parents were at first objecting to their sons' devotion to service, but when they saw how their sons were steadfast and were faithful in their private responsibilities and service, they encouraged them and honored their service.

5 - The Problems of Service:

It is in the nature of God's service that it be full of problems, difficulties, and hardships. It is a form of the narrow gate which the Lord said all believers should welcome because it leads to spiritual freedom.

When the Lord Jesus sent out His disciples, He sent them as lambs among wolves (Luke 10:3). This is the true picture of the servant in the field of service: "lambs among wolves". **It is a unique scene to see lambs, still meek, serving wolves, without being harmed by them!**

Since then, faithful servants have built their service on that foundation. St. Paul said, "I think that God has displayed us, the apostles, last, as men condemned to death. We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong!, you are distinguished, but we are dishonored. Even to the present hour we both hunger and thirst, and are poorly clothed, and beaten, and homeless, and we labor, working with our own hands. Being

reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we endure it; being defamed, we entreat. We have been made as the filth of the world, the offscouring of all things until now” (1 Corinthians 4:9-13).

The apostle enumerated these hardships in his second epistle to the Corinthians, chapter 12. The faithful servant is the one who carries the spiritual armor enduring hardship to conquer the kingdom of the devil (2 Timothy 2:3). **If we understood all this, we would realize that the problems of service are caused by the devil who does his best to set obstacles to the spreading of the kingdom of God on earth, and that he is helped by evil persons who want to do his will.**

The problems in service stem from issues of money, rebellious people, those whom we serve, persecution from without, division from within, or the nature of the work itself and its difficulties. Although we have discussed some of these points, we would now like to elaborate on them.

a - Money

Money may be an important issue which, when servants meet up with it may cause some to avoid service. The problems relating to money may be divided into two types: the servant’s personal needs and the needs of the service in general. **Truly, money has never been an obstacle hindering the devotion of the faithful servant, especially regarding his personal needs. When we look at what the Lord Jesus said in Matthew 6:19-34 we read about His sure promise that He will give us what we need. The Lord wants us to have confidence in our Heavenly Father as a child has complete confidence in his earthly father. The servant should be free from worry, regardless of whether he is responsible for himself only, or for his family or for the whole congregation. It is impossible to have faith and worry at the same time, as it is impossible for fire and water, or light and darkness to be together.** When the believer believes in God’s promises, he can follow Him with victory over hardships and difficulties.

When the Lord Jesus sends His servant into the field of service, He takes care of his personal needs. “Who ever goes to a war at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat from its fruit? Or who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk of the flock?” (1 Corinthians 9:7). “And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:19). When Jesus sent out His disciples, He told them not to carry money bag, sack, nor sandals (Luke 10:4). We wonder how can God, Who cares for the birds who do not sow, nor reap nor gather to barns, not care for His servants? “The eyes of all look expectantly to You, and You give them their food in due season. You open Your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing” (Psalms 145:15, 16).

We have talked about self-deprivation as a virtue which a servant should acquire. **The servant who sacrifices a certain standard of living for the sake of service, will surely be rewarded by the Lord a hundredfold, not with material blessings but with spiritual blessings.** “As poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things” (2 Corinthians 6:10). Let us follow the Lord’s example; He was rich, yet for our sakes He became poor, that we through His poverty become rich (2 Corinthians 8:9). **The Lord praised the**

servant of the church of Smyrna saying, “I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich)” (Revelation 2:9). These words apply to all devoted servants.

There is another point of view that applies to volunteer servants, namely that money may obstruct service. Some volunteers do not serve because they wish to work overtime to increase their income. So they spend their spare time and effort at work, resulting in a negative effect on their service. One may wonder, “is raising the standard of living a sin, where the burdens of life are abundant?” We understand this way of thinking. But we have to understand the message of the servant and his personality. **The servant is a person who finds his joy in the Lord and in transmitting his holy message to others. Other people may find their joy elsewhere, even if they are alright.** The Lord said, “My delight was with the sons of men” (Proverbs 8:31). This holds true of the feeling of the servant. His delight is with God’s creation.

We discussed this point earlier when we spoke about self deprivation as a factor of strength in the life of God’s servant. **We must add that the servant believes that anyone who faithfully serves God will receive His blessings, spiritual and material blessings, as well as blessings in health and in all his endeavors.** Do we forget this? Do we forget the Lord’s saying, “Give and it shall be given to you” (Luke 6:38)? The servant is rewarded in other aspects other than the materialistic ones, including God’s care and protection, the gift of health, the blessings of happiness and inner peace. All these cannot be valued with money.

Concerning the needs of the service itself, money must be seen as a means and not as a goal. We have never heard that the Church ever asked for money to satisfy its needs. We hear, for example, that the believers in the early church used to sell their possessions and bring the money and put it at the feet of the apostles (Acts 4:32, 35). This occurred simply as a spiritual incentive when “the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and one soul, neither said any of them ought of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had all things common.” This beautiful expression written by the author of the book of Acts shows the early church’s view towards money. The prices of their possessions were laid down “at the apostles’ feet.” This should be the value of money in the eyes of a faithful servant, always under his feet. He uses money without being used by money.

Many servants forget the life of self deprivation and do not want to be self sufficient. Many servants run after money and are enslaved by it, and at the end perish because of it. Many servants take off the clothes of grace and put on the robes of the Pharisees. They devour widow’s houses and for a pretence make long prayers. How many servants lose the spirit of self sufficiency and become greedy for money, which makes those whom they serve despise them.

We repeat that money should be placed under the feet of faithful servants. It should remain there all the time. They do not seek it, but it seeks them when those served feel that it will be wisely used for the glory of God and to satisfy the needy.

When the church was poor in its resources, it was rich in its faith and its men. When its material resources increased, it lost its spirituality as a church of Christ. I cannot forget what has been recorded in history about a conversation that took place between a Pope of Rome and a monk from the West. **The Pope was showing the poor monk all the treasures of the Vatican**

and said, “The time has passed when the church can say I have no gold nor silver” The monk replied, “The church can also no longer say to the paralyzed man, “In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, rise up and walk.”

There are many useful projects in the mind of the servant. But he has to seek God first before any one or anything else. He has to go to the Householder to arrange what is good in His eyes. No doubt, He is going to do what is best for His church and people at the right time and in the right way. **We do not need money as much as we need faith.**

b - The Attacks of People:

Sometimes, people inside the field of service may attack the service. This is not strange for the Lord is at war with Amalek from generation to generation (Exodus 17:16). Amalek is a symbol for the devil who has followers in every age to fight God’s work.

We read in the New Testament about many who fought the truth. **Elymas the sorcerer attacked Paul and Barnabas in Cyprus and wanted to turn away the deputy from the faith** (Acts 13). Alexander the coppersmith did Paul much evil and greatly withstood his words (2 Timothy 4: 14,15). Furthermore, when St. Paul wrote to the church in Corinth about the legality of his apostleship, he numbered his perils in service, one of these was perils **among false brethren** (2 Corinthians 11:26). When he wrote to the Galatians, he also spoke of **false brethren** who came in privacy to spy out their liberty which they had in Christ to bring them into bondage (Galatians 2:4). He wrote to the Corinthians saying, “For a great and effective door has opened to me, **and there are many adversaries**” (1 Corinthians 16:9). When he spoke about the last days, he mentioned many adversaries: “Now as Jannes and Jambres resisted Moses, so do these also resist the truth; men of corrupt minds, disapproved concerning the faith, but they will progress no further, for their folly will be manifest to all, as theirs also was” (2 Timothy 3:8, 9).

The adversaries who attack God’s work, are a proof that the service is successful. The devil does not attack except when he feels he is in danger. The faithful servant should be determined. Jesus, the son of Sirach, said, **“My son, when you start serving the Lord, you should prepare yourself for difficulties”** (Sirach 2:1).

It is not necessary that those adversaries be from outside the field of service, for sometimes they are from within. Such adversaries may be more dangerous to the service than are external adversaries. When our Lord Jesus Himself was attacked, He was attacked not by outsiders, but by men of His religion, from the Scribes and the Pharisees!

The apostle Paul mentioned in more than one place in his epistles about “false brothers” and the dangers he had encountered from them. This name, “false brothers”, fits them perfectly for they have all the external features of being brothers, but unfortunately, they are not genuine. Paul said, “For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. And no wonder! for Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light.

Therefore, it is no great thing if his servants also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works” (2 Corinthians 11:13-15)-

We should not forget these facts so that we may not easily fail. We have to remember the Apostle's words about the adversaries that **“they will progress no further”** (2 Timothy 3:9). If they create divisions and even think that they have succeeded, the apostle still encourages us saying, “they will progress no further.” Sometimes the passage of the river may be narrow for it passes through some rocks. **When it overcomes that section, it flows more strongly. We may meet obstacles in our service and the scope of work may narrow. But let us be patient for these difficulties have an end, and when they end, the service will flow powerfully.**

The faithful servants should not forsake the service because of many difficulties. If the apostles had done so at the beginning of Christianity, we would not have received the message of Christ. St. Paul said, “To whom we did not yield submission even for an hour, that the truth of the Gospel might continue with you” (Galatians 2:5). All the forces of evil have attacked Christianity, but the voice of truth has never been put out. The church struggled for three centuries, like a baby crawling on thorns, and many carried the light of truth, until it was victorious. All faithful servants should be determined, feeling their responsibility to fulfill their message, never forsaking the field of service to the devil and his helpers. Remember God’s commandment to His disciple Timothy, “But you be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, **fulfill your ministry**” (2 Timothy 4:5). **The promise of our Lord Jesus encourages us as He said to Joshua, “Be strong and of good courage, do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.”** (Joshua 1:9).

c - Those Being Served:

Sometimes those being served may cause the servants to abstain from service. There are fields in which it is very difficult to serve. The servant may not feel any response from his students. He may not feel any spiritual growth after a period of service but rather complete negligence. The Lord Jesus Himself, when teaching in Nazareth, was offended by the people. “He did not do many mighty works there because of their unbelief” (Matthew 13:58).

There is no doubt that students vary in their readiness to accept God’s Word. These souls resemble the soil that the Lord Jesus referred to in the parable of the sower. As there is good soil that gives fruit thirty fold or sixty fold or a hundred fold, there is stony soil and soil full of thorns which choke the seeds. Even the good soil needs time. The Lord Jesus said, “The ones that fell on the 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). Let us pause and meditate on these last words, **“bear fruit with patience”**, in spite of the soil being good and the heart being good, according to the testimony of the Lord.

When agricultural fields are neglected for a long time, the land needs much effort to make it fruitful. Likewise, when souls are neglected for a long time, they need a lot of time, effort, patience and care to become fruitful.

We do not doubt that if we take care of souls, that they will be corrected, even if they vary in the time when they bring forth fruit and in the amount of the fruit. All souls are created according To God’s image and in His likeness. As St. Paul wrote, **“Every creature of God is good”** (1 Timothy 4:4). **When the Jews in the city of Corinth attacked St. Paul, he shook his garments and said unto them, “Your blood be upon your own heads; I am clean. From now on, I will go to the Gentiles.”** (Acts 18:6). However, the Lord appeared to him in a vision saying, “Be not afraid, but speak, and hold not your peace, for I am with you for I have much people in this city.” And he continued there a year and six months teaching the Word of God among them.

All this applies to the nature of the students and their varied readiness to accept the Word of God. **There is another characteristic of students in general, which is that they are very moody.** The multitude **cheered Jesus on his entry to Jerusalem with cheers of victory, and they welcomed him like a king. After five days, these same people changed and shouted, “Crucify Him, crucify Him. His blood be upon us and on our children.”** In the city of Lystra, St. Paul healed the lame man. It was such a great miracle that the people said, “The gods are come down to us in the likeness of men.” And they called Barnabas, Jupiter and Paul, Mercury. They even brought oxen and garlands unto the gates and would have done sacrifices with the people, but the two apostles prevented it. **Soon these feelings changed and they stoned Paul and drew him out of the city, supposing him to be dead** (Acts 14). This is how people behave. St. Paul wrote to the believers in Galatia rebuking them, **“I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you into the grace of Christ to a different Gospel”** (Galatians 1:6).

Therefore, let the faithful servant continue in his way putting all these considerations in front of him, feeling that he is not better than His Master, Who faced the same difficulties, not seeking early fruits. After the seeds are sown, they need water, continuous care and time, amounts of which differ from plant to plant. in all these stages, **God alone is the One who makes them grow.**

Let me whisper in your ear, O faithful servant, if you have strong faith in God’s power, the service will change people and the fruits will multiply. In the miracle of the healing of the paralytic, when Jesus saw the faith of the four friends who carried him, He healed him (Mark 2:5). When God sees our faith and our love to serve others, He will surely answer and work.

F) EVERYONE IS INVITED TO SERVE

Service in its general meaning is not limited to teaching. Its meaning must be expanded in our minds. Service is associated with love. These two cannot be separated. Whenever love prevails, service also prevails. Whenever there is true successful service, there is great love and inflamed zeal.

The first and greatest commandment in Christianity is love: love to God and to our neighbor. Our Lord of glory said, “On these two commandments, hang all the law and the prophets” (Matthew 22:40). If you are a living member in the Body of Christ, you have to empathize with every suffering member in that Body. If you share the feelings of the suffering members, your love will lead you to ease their sufferings. This is service. However, if you do not feel the suffering of members, you should know that you are not a living member in Christ.

Service is not only limited to preaching and teaching, but it goes far beyond. When you talk to others about God from the church pulpit, you are serving. If you do not have this gift, but you talk to others about God privately, you are serving. When you visit a sick person, encouraging him, and strengthening his faith and his hope in God, you are serving. When you comfort a sad or troubled person, you are serving. When you lead a person to church or to a spiritual meeting, you are serving. When you help a needy person or convert a sinner from his erroneous ways, you are serving. There are many opportunities through which we can serve the Lord and show our feelings of love toward Him.

The miracle of the paralytic, who was carried by four friends, has many points worth meditating upon. (Mark: 2:3-5) We have before us a rescue team, the first of its kind. We know for sure that they were not hired, but were friends. It is not possible that they had carried him from his home in the same way as they lowered him from the roof. But most probably, when they failed to reach Jesus through the multitude, their love led them to “uncover the roof and when they had broken it up, they let down the bed wherein the sick of palsy was lying.” We notice that they did not talk with our Lord nor mentioned anything to Him. All they did was bring their sick friend in front of the Giver of Life and the Healer. Their characters included strong faith and persistence in reaching their goal.

Can we mimic these four friends? Can't we carry a soul, which is sick with sin, and bring him in front of the Lord? Misery accompanies sin and seldom do we find a person who wants to remain miserable. Many need to be carried to Jesus, as the impotent man at Bethesda said, “I have no man,” when the Lord Jesus asked him, “Do you want to be made whole?” (John 5).

Many of the spiritually sick may know something about Jesus and His power, His mercy, and His grace, but they are dead with their sins. The dead person cannot move and has no will. Many are miserable because they are away from the Lord, and they are in desperate need of someone to wake them up. “Awake you who sleep, arise from the dead and Christ shall give you light” (Ephesians 5:14). Can a sleepy person do anything? Such is the sinner. These people need somebody to bring them in front of the Lord. **Mary and Martha sent a strange message to the Lord.** “Lord, behold, he whom You love is sick” (John 11:3). They did not make any specific request. They did not tell Him about their love for their brother and their anxiety for his well-being because they knew that God’s love to Lazarus is more than their love to him.

Now, my dear brother, how many spiritually sick do you know? Can we send a message to the Lord as did the two sisters? Can we pray and tell Him, “This person whom you love and for whom You died, is sick; this person whom You love, is in bondage of sin and under the control of the devil?” Can't we do that? How can a loving heart see a person in need

and not do anything for him? The apostle wonders about him, saying, “How does the love of God abide in him?” (1 John 3:17).

G) FROM JERUSALEM TO THE UTTERMOST PART OF THE EARTH

First: In Jerusalem:

The Lord Jesus commanded His disciples not to leave Jerusalem but to witness there. What is Jerusalem, in which the Lord asks me to witness first? Jerusalem is the city of the Great King and has the temple. It refers to the heart, and the holy private spiritual life of the person. To witness to Christ in Jerusalem means to witness with my private life and my holy deeds.

Many do not follow the sequence which the Lord set and try to witness in Samaria or unto the uttermost part of the earth, for example, before they witness in Jerusalem. Mistakes and failures result. **Our Lord Jesus reminds me that I should witness to Him in Jerusalem first. From Jerusalem came the Good News of salvation, and from your holy private life come the blessings which benefit others.**

Jerusalem was the center of Judea where the temple was and where the sacrifices were offered. It was a major attraction for the Jews, where they visited and found their comfort. Likewise, the inner Jerusalem, or your private life as a servant of God, is looked at by all people; and through you, they glorify the Heavenly Father. Therefore, O you servant of God, from your inner Jerusalem, present sacrifices of thanksgiving, the fruits of lips confessing His Name.

Why do we start serving from Jerusalem? It is the closest circle in which we can witness to the Lord. If we do a good job in it, then we prove that we deserve to serve outside it, wherein we receive power from God. The Lord's commandment to His disciples was not to depart from Jerusalem until they had received the Promise of the Father, the power of the Holy Spirit which would work in them and through them. God always wants service to be accomplished through the power of His Spirit so that the credit goes to Him. How often do we sin when we proceed to serve, depending on our own power and wisdom? This power, which was granted to the disciples, was granted to them in the upper room while they were waiting for the Promise of the Father, praying fervently in front of the Lord with one soul, with the doors and windows closed. **Likewise, we shall not receive this power except in the “upper room,” that is, when we are above earthly matters and while praying waiting for God's work and His grace in us** after we have locked the doors and windows of the soul. In this spiritual upper room, the Lord will reveal Himself to us as He did to His disciples granting us joy and peace. With this power, Peter witnessed to Christ in front of thousands of Jews after he had denied Him in front of a slave. We, too, can serve God with this power, even to the uttermost part of the earth, for then we will be led by the Spirit.

Second: In All Judea

The Jews are God's own people to whom He came, but they did not accept Him. **Witnessing in Judea is serving the Lord at home, among the family and the small community in which we live.** We notice that the command was **"In All Judea."** We often neglect serving in this field which may create problems in the service. Joshua said, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" (Joshua 24:15). St. Paul said, **"If anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever"** (1 Timothy 5:8). The servant may be successful in his service, but he may have problems at home. Therefore, the Apostle emphasizes this point, **"For if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?"** (1 Timothy 3:5). The Apostle considers taking care of one's home a measure by which to evaluate the servant. If one does not take care of his family, how can he take care of the whole church?

Third: In Samaria

The Samaritans were a mixture of Jews and atheists. **Witnessing in Samaria represents our service among believers and unbelievers.** After the servant has witnessed to Christ by his own private life in Jerusalem and in **all Judea**, he starts serving in a field which requires more preparation and greater struggle. Serving in Samaria requires love, compassion, and consideration for the feelings of others. When the city of Samaria refused Jesus, John and James wanted to destroy the city by fire. "And it came to pass when the time was come that He should be received up, he steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem, and sent messengers before His face, and they went and entered into a village of the Samaritans to make ready for Him. And they did not receive Him because His face was as though He would go to Jerusalem. And when His disciples James and John saw this, they said, "Lord do You want to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, even as Elijah did?" But He turned and rebuked them and said, "You do not know what manner of spirit you are of. For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them." And they went to another village" (Luke 9:51-56).

Moreover, the servant needs special studies to fit the needs of those he serves. It is a difficult field, but one's faith may be a blessing to many as the faith of the Samaritan woman was a blessing to the whole city.

Fourth: To The Uttermost Part of the Earth

It is so joyful when God's Word grows and spreads. "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the Gospel of peace, who bring glad tidings of good things!" (Romans 10:15). **How happy is the servant when he goes to unknown places carrying the Good News and the message of salvation to people whom he does not know and with whom there are no national or cultural ties, nor even the same language, race, or dogma. He goes with the mere incentive of deep love, resembling the One who loved him and died for him.**

However, all this needs special qualifications. It needs faith and stability. It requires that we watch our way and follow God's commandments.

H) A FINAL WORD

To end this topic, we would like all servants to pay attention to this simple word: Let us not take matters superficially, or look at them from only one angle. Let us consider all the needs of the church from all angles so that we may not be enthusiastic for just one side. **Let us not be zealous for service (though good and holy), and forget to wait for the Promise of the Father and His power. Let us not forget ourselves in the midst of the great sea of service and its enormous field. No matter how we struggle and labor,** "The harvest is plentiful and the laborers are few." Let us believe that God can work through us. Let us sit with ourselves quietly and evaluate our principles in service. Let us start from the beginning with strong faith and steadfast determination.