

**Selections from the Book**  
**PARADISE**  
**OF**  
**THE SPIRIT**

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These chapters are selected from among the three books entitled *Paradise of the Spirit*, by Bishop Youanis, parts 1, 2, and 3.

# REPENTANCE

**“But unless you repent you will all likewise perish.”**

(Luke 13:5)

- A) What does sin do to us?**
- B) What does repentance do?**
- C) Our merciful God Whom we worship**
- D) How do I repent?**
- E) *\*\*section removed from this version\*\****
- F) Questions about repentance**
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- H) From the sayings of the Fathers about repentance**
- I) A prayer for repentance**
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God created man pure and holy in His image and likeness (Genesis 1:26). Because of man's disobedience to the Creator, he sinned and fell. His nature changed and he lost many blessings. He was expelled from the paradise where he used to enjoy God's presence. He lost his peace, his joy and his authority over the creation and was left with sin, the consequences of which he suffered. Of his own free will, he deprived himself from the light and warmth of the Sun of Righteousness.

Before we ride the boat of rescue to go through the sea of repentance on our way to the port of salvation, let us pose a very important question:

## What is Sin?

Sin, no matter how lightly thought of or considered as trivial, is still a transgression and disobedience to God. (James 2:11). Sin is a rebellion against God. It is death itself. The Lord Jesus has said that the prodigal son, "was dead, and is alive again; and was lost and is found." (Luke 15:32)

Sin is weakness, defeat and failure. Man could not control himself but instead submitted himself to the authority of sin and its bondage.

## A) WHAT DOES SIN DO TO US?

### 1. Worry and Loss of Peace:

As a result of his sin, man lost his peace and inherited worry. Therefore, worry is associated with sin; man loses his inner peace which is God's best gift and which St. Paul described as the peace which surpasses all understanding. (Philippians 4:7) The Prophet Isaiah said, "**The wicked are like the troubled sea, when it cannot rest**, whose waters cast up mire and dirt. "**There is no peace,**" Says my God, "**for the wicked.**" (Isaiah 57:20-21) What a description the Prophet gave about the wicked that "they cannot rest." Even if the wicked wants to rest, he cannot; for peace is a fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22) and worry is a fruit of sin. There is no fellowship between darkness and light.

**The evil person has an enemy, which bothers him. This enemy is the conscience**, to which our Lord Jesus asked us to agree with. "Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him." (Matthew 5:25) That was evident in Cain's life after he had killed his brother. He screamed to God saying, "From Your face; I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond on the earth, and it will happen that anyone who finds me will kill me. And the LORD set a mark on Cain, lest anyone finding him should kill him." (Genesis 4:14) This mark caused Cain's conscience to bother him more.

**As long as man is away from God, he is a victim of worry until he returns to Him. This is the way God wanted that we should never find complete comfort and peace in this world; so we come back to Him.** That is like the dove, which Noah sent out and did not find a comfortable place in the world so it returned to the ark. Again when Jonah escaped from God, he was in trouble

in the sea and could not find any way of salvation except by returning to God. He prayed while he was in the whale's belly and God rescued him.

We read about many criminals, who after the police fail in arresting them, surrender themselves of their own free will and confess their crimes even many years later. This is because they prefer to confess and be punished rather than hide and be bothered by their conscience.

**In fact, there is nothing in the world that takes away our peace except sin.** Job lost his cattle, sheep; camels and all his children, all in one day yet his catastrophe was not as great as David's after he had sinned. Job's temptation could not take away his peace for he said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD." (Job 1:21) But after David had sinned, we hear him saying, "I am weary with my groaning; All night I make my bed swim; I drench my couch with my tears." (Psalms 6:6)

## **2. Sorrow and Distress:**

**Sorrow and distress accompany sin. Joy is a fruit of the Holy Spirit,** (Galatians 5:22) but sadness is a fruit of sin. When the Israelites were in the Babylonian captivity, they sat by the rivers of Babylon surrounded by beautiful willows. But all that magnificent nature could not make them forget the bitterness of captivity from which they were suffering. They mingled the river waters with their tears and instead of joyful songs; weeping and crying voices were heard. They hung their harps upon the willows, for there is no joy in captivity. "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept when we remembered Zion." (Psalms 137:1) This psalm reminds us of the spiritual captivity and gives us a picture of the individual who is captured by the devil away from Jerusalem, the city of the Great King, (Matthew 5:35) to Babylon, the city of adultery. (Revelation 14:8, 18:2) That individual has lost his peace and joy saying, "How shall we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land?" (Psalms 137:4)

## **3. Loss of Hope:**

As we have read, worry, sadness and distress are all fruits of sin. These fruits can grow until they reach the point of despair and committing suicide.

## **4. Bad Relationships with People:**

**Sin deprives me of my peace with God** and fellowship with Him. **Moreover, it deprives me of my peace with people.** Love is the bond of perfection that binds people together; and sin has the opposite effect, for sin in itself is transgression. "Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness." (1 John 3:4) Sin is transgression against God's commandments and against people too. What shall we say about the murderer, the thief and the adulterer? Are not their sins considered transgressions against others?

## 5. God's Wrath:

**Sin brings God's wrath on people.** God cursed the earth which He had created. He told Adam after he had eaten from the tree of which he had been forbidden, “Cursed is the ground for your sake; in toil shall you eat of it all the days of your life.” (Genesis 3:17) God burnt Sodom and Gomorrah because of sin and even the intercession of Abraham did not succeed in saving them. God destroyed the ancient world with the flood because of sin, saving only Noah and his family. (2 Peter 2:5-6) Also, God destroyed in one day twenty-three thousand Israelites because they had sinned with the Moabites. (1 Corinthians 10:8) Sin made David cry day and night, wetting his bed with his tears.

Sin deprives man from God’s help. When Achan, Carmi’s son, sinned, God did not help His people and they were defeated in front of the small village of Ai in spite of His previous help to them when they conquered many nations. (Joshua 7) Sin separates us from God and hence He does not hear our cries. “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) David also said, “If I regard iniquity in my heart, The LORD will not hear.” (Psalms 66:18) Sin deprives us of God’s blessings. “Your iniquities have turned these things away, and your sins have withheld good things from you.” (Jeremiah 5:25)

## 6. Sin Brings Forth Disease and Shame:

**Nothing brings shame to the soul and failure in life except sin.** “Righteousness exalts a nation. But sin is a reproach to any people.” (Proverbs 14:34) If you want to know how sound these words are, look at the adulterers and the drunk. **Moreover, sin can cause diseases to the body** as Jesus said in the Bible to the sick man of Bethesda who had been sick for thirty-eight years, “See, you have been made whole. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you.” (John 5:14)

## 7. Sin Brings Forth Fear:

**Man inherits fear and shame from sin, it deprives him of his control even over himself,** and he becomes enslaved to bad habits. He becomes afraid of even trivial beings such as weak animals and small insects. That is after he used to live in the paradise with wild animals unharmed by them because they were all under his dominion. (Genesis 1:26) Man lost this dominion of his own free will when he sinned. Consequently, fear entered his life. But through repentance, he struggled to reach a state of righteousness which Adam enjoyed before he sinned. This explains why many saints were able to live with the beasts.

## B) WHAT DOES REPENTANCE DO?

**Repentance is the message of Christianity.** John the Baptist, who prepared the way before the Lord Jesus, called the people to repentance. (Mark 1:4) The Lord Jesus Himself preached “the Gospel of Repentance,” and commanded His disciples to call people to repentance. “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

The word "**Metanoia**" is a Greek word, which means repentance. In its original linguistic meaning, it means the changing of the heart and the changing of one's life. Repentance in the Orthodox understanding is a new life. St. Paul said, “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things become new.” (2 Corinthians 5:17)

Christianity calls for the renewal of everything and teaches that “No man puts a piece of a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. Nor do people put new wine into old wineskins.” (Matthew 9:16-17) These words of the Lord Jesus explain the correct understanding of repentance. It is a complete change of the whole life, not just putting a new piece on an old garment.

Many saints have spoken about repentance. They said, “**It is a reconciliation with the Lord, a second baptism, a remission of sins, and a returning to God.** It repairs what sin has damaged and builds up what evil has destroyed. It renews the heart of the sinner and dresses the wicked with the clothes of righteousness. It removes all works of darkness and evil. It heals those who are sick with sin. It raises up those who are dead with transgressions. It is a sea in which all sins are washed away. It attracts those who are living in sin to the kingdom of heaven.”

When we sin, we lose our talents, virtues and blessings, and when we repent, we get them all back. Penance is an open door to salvation. It never closes, for it is God's compassionate bosom: “The one who comes to Me, I will by no means cast out.” (John 6:37)

Penance slows God's wrath. It saved Nineveh's people after the king, men, women and children felt sorry, put on sackcloth and sat in ashes.

## C) OUR MERCIFUL GOD WHOM WE WORSHIP

### 1. The Prophets and Apostles Spoke about God's Mercy:

God's mercy is the basis for the concept of repentance. Because God knows our weak nature, He made this point very clear through His continuous promises in the Holy Bible. In the Old Testament, God said to His people, "**The LORD God is merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.**" (Exodus 34:6-7)

**David praised God for His great and abundant mercy.** In one of the psalms, he was so enthusiastic about God's mercy that he said, "Bless the LORD, O my soul; And all that is within me, bless His holy name! Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits: Who forgives all your iniquities, Who heals all your diseases, Who crowns you with lovingkindness and tender mercies. **The LORD is merciful and gracious, Slow to anger, and abounding in mercy.** He will not always strive with us, Nor will He keep His anger forever. He has not dealt with us according to our sins, Nor punished us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, So great is His mercy toward those who fear Him. As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us. As a father pities his children, So the LORD pities those who fear Him, For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust." (Psalms 103)

David praised God in another psalm saying, "The LORD is gracious and full of compassion, Slow to anger and great in mercy. The LORD is good to all, And His tender mercies are over all His works." (Psalms 145:8-9) He said in a third place, "The earth, O LORD, is full of Your mercy." (Psalms 119:64) Also, "For Your lovingkindness is before my eyes." (Psalms 26:3) and "**Your lovingkindness is better than life.**" (Psalms 63:3)

**Jonah, the prophet**, who warned the people of Nineveh that their city would be destroyed because of their sins, became so annoyed with God's mercy that he said, "Ah, LORD, was not this what I said when I was still in my country? Therefore, I fled previously to Tarshish; for I **knew that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm.**" (Jonah 4:2)

God's great mercy became a subject of meditation for all the saints. Jeremiah, the prophet, says, "Through the LORD's mercies we are not consumed, Because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness." (Lamentations 3:22-23) He saw and felt God's mercy new every morning.

These proclamations are given in the Old Testament. **For the New Testament, the covenant of grace and salvation is predominant.** The Bible shows God's great mercy in the free salvation that God offered us. God's salvation is based on God's mercy because **without mercy, God would not have redeemed us, "He loved us for no reason." He loved us for his great mercy.**

**Zachariah**, being filled with the Holy Spirit, prophesied saying, "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest; For you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways,

To give knowledge of salvation to His people By the remission of their sins, Through the **tender mercy of our God**, With which the Dayspring from on high has visited us.” (Luke 1:76-78)

St. Paul said, “But God, who is **rich in mercy**, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.” (Ephesians 2:4-5) He also said, “Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but **according to His mercy** He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit.” (Titus 3:5) St. Peter said, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His **abundant mercy** has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” (1 Peter 1:3)

## 2. Mercy and Redemption:

**What is the relationship between redemption and God's mercy?** This relates to the issue of forgiveness in general. For without God’s mercy, there would have been no forgiveness and no repentance. I repent to receive forgiveness, for if God does not forgive me, what is the use of repentance? Let us, then, eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we shall die.

How can God forgive my sins? Is there a contradiction to God’s justice, which states that “The wages of sin is death?” (Romans 6:23) This could have been true if God’s mercy had not interfered. But God’s mercy has met God’s justice and that is what David stated, “**Mercy and truth are met together**; Righteousness and peace have kissed each other.” (Psalms 85:10) God’s mercy did not contradict His justice, but it found a solution. That solution is based on God’s death to redeem man who sinned. God, who is unlimited, takes a human body like us to save man who deserves an unlimited punishment because he disobeyed God’s commandment. No angel or prophet could have done this deed of redemption.

## 3. The Merciful God Promises Forgiveness to those Who Repent:

Surely, we can say now that we live in the age of mercy, me. Let us go to Him repenting, confessing our sins, believing in the truth of His promises that He is opening His arms calling everyone, “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” (Matthew 11:28) “The one who comes to Me, I will by no means cast out.” (John 6:37) **He is ready to forget our sins and never remember them**, as the prophet Micah says, “Who is a God like You, Pardoning iniquity And passing over the transgression of the remnant of His heritage? He does not retain His anger forever, Because He delights in mercy. He will again have compassion on us, And will subdue our iniquities. You will cast our sins Into the depths of the sea.” (Micah 7:18-19)

**How numerous are God’s promises, which encourage us to go to Him, repenting.** He promised that He would forget all our sins and make us new creatures. The Lord says to us by Ezekiel, “But if a wicked man turns from all his sins which he has committed, keeps all My statutes, and does what is lawful and right, he shall surely live; he shall not die. None of the transgressions which he has committed shall be remembered against him; because of the righteousness which he has done, he shall live. “Do I have any pleasure at all that the wicked should die?” says the Lord GOD, “and not that he should turn from his ways and live?” But when a righteous man turns away from his righteousness and commits iniquity, and does according to all

the abominations that the wicked man does, shall he live? All the righteousness which he has done shall not be remembered; because of the unfaithfulness of which he is guilty and the sin which he has committed, because of them he shall die.” (Ezekiel 18:21-24)

God also says by Isaiah, “Let the wicked forsake his way, And the unrighteous man his thoughts; Let him return to the LORD, And He will have mercy on him; And to our God, For He will abundantly pardon.” (Isaiah 55:7) St. Peter said, “Repent therefore and be converted that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.” (Acts 3:19) and he also said that God was “not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.” (2 Peter 3:9)

All these divine sayings comfort the burdened souls and give rest to the troubled hearts. The most important parable which shows God’s great mercy to sinners is that of “the Prodigal Son” (Luke 15). St. Luke started this chapter saying, “Then all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to Him to hear Him. And the Pharisees and scribes murmured saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them”. (Luke 15:1-2)

Actually the parables which Jesus told, answering the complaints of the Pharisees and scribes and showing God’s great love to the sinners are three: **the parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin, and the parable of the prodigal son.** Each one of them speaks of God’s great love and His abundant compassion to sinners to such a great extent that one eventually submits to God’s call to repentance and says with Paul before his renewal, “Lord, what do you want me to do?” (Acts 9:6) Let us now meditate on the parable of “**The Prodigal Son**”.

#### **4. The Parable of the Prodigal Son:**

The son who left his father’s house is an example of the souls who forsake God and His house. That son went to a far off country where he wasted his money in riotous living. Then he began to be in need. So he worked feeding the swines and he wanted to fill his belly with the husks that the swines did eat. **All this gives us a picture as to what sin and living away from God might lead to.** But as soon as that son felt how bad his situation was, he arose and came to his father asking forgiveness. This parable shows us the steps toward repentance. The Lord Jesus said regarding that son, “And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him.” (Luke 15:20)

How explicit this illustration is by which the Lord Jesus wanted to show His great love and compassion to sinners. “But when he was yet a great way off.” What do these words show us except waiting? The father, emotionally moved, waits for his son who had forsaken him and asked for the portion of goods that falls to him, without being ashamed of himself. If this is the case with the physical father whose life is full of weaknesses, how much then of the feelings of the Heavenly Father toward His children? He said to us saying, “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 7:11)

**What was the reaction of the father upon seeing his lost son?** “He had compassion and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him.” The father did all that toward his son even before the son uttered one word of apology or proved his sorrow. All these steps are not very appropriate for the

father. Is not this more appropriate for the son? But that is love which forgets all sins. If the physical father showed that great love toward his sinful son, how much greater is God's love toward His children whom the devil has enslaved under his authority? He is the One Who said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance." (Matthew 9:12-13)

**How did the son act toward his father?** While the son was in the far off country, he promised himself to apologize to his father, saying, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants." (Luke 15:18-19) However, it happened that when he met his father, he uttered those words but the father did not let him say the last sentence which is, "Make me as one of your hired servants." This behavior on the part of the father has a very important significance in our relationship with God for we never lose our sonship to the Heavenly Father, no matter how many sins we may have committed.

Therefore, our church, through which we become children of God, holds that baptism should never be re-administered, even if one denied the faith and repented. We should never forget the fact that we are the children of God. He paid His precious blood as price for this sonship. "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) The expression "Our Father" is a beautiful one, which the Lord rejoices in hearing. That is why He asked His disciples to use it. "When you pray, say: Our Father in heaven." (Luke 11:2)

**What happened after the lost son apologized and repented?** The father ordered his servants to "Bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet. And bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry; for **this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.**" (Luke 15:22-24) The son became naked by sinning and the father put clothes on him. (Genesis 3:7) We might ask ourselves, Does not the older son, who spent his life obeying his father, deserve all that? But this is the compassion of the father, for the father pities the sick son more than the rest of his brothers. Likewise, the Heavenly Father pities the spiritually sick more than the ninety-nine who do not need a doctor.

The ring put on his hand is a sign of the covenant between the father and his son. He does not remember his sins anymore. All that the father cared was to cover his son's nakedness so that he might look like a son again, as if he had not done any evil. All that the son offered his father were his feelings expressed in some words. But the father rewarded him with all his blessings. Likewise in our relationship with our Heavenly Father, we need only offer Him our feelings and some words and tears, and He will accept us and give us of His abundant richness and spiritual gifts to compensate all that we lose by sinning.

## D) HOW DO I REPENT?

### 1. Examine Yourself:

**The first step in repentance is to sit with yourself and examine yourself as the Prodigal Son did.** Think how miserable you are and how you have lost your peace. Tell yourself, “How many hired servants of my Heavenly Father have bread enough to spare (spiritual gifts) and I perish with hunger (spiritually)? How did I lose my happiness, my comfort, my joy and peace? What have I gained from my dark life by living in sin? If you are frank and sincere with yourself, you will end up in a deep prayer from a heart full of shame and eyes full of tears, and you will start beating upon your chest in sorrow saying the same words, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before You and am no more worthy to be called your son, make me as one of Your hired servants.”

Truly, examining oneself is one of the major factors in building up the spiritual life. All the saints have talked about its importance. You may be ashamed to tell others about what is inside you, and you may not accept others to rebuke or direct you, but you are not ashamed of yourself when you rebuke it and be strict with it.

**Examining oneself does not consist of looking at the negative factors only, that is remembering your sins, but at the positive too, that is, the virtues.** He who does not continuously struggle may be indifferent in his emotions toward God; like a flying bird, it cannot go upwards if it does not flap its wings.

The purpose of examining oneself is to overcome one’s mistakes and trespasses that one is enslaved to. Remember all the persons, circumstances and situations that caused you to sin. Then put the blame on yourself for your failings.

**Example:** If you get angry frequently, ask yourself: Why did I lose my temper when such a person was talking to me? Why did I not accept his words with a simple heart? Even if his words frustrated me, why did I not endure him like Jesus Who endured all the evil doers? Are these insults like the ones Jesus endured? Am I a faithful disciple to the Lord who said, “A servant is not greater than his master, nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him.” (John 13:16) The reason for losing my temper was my lack of love for that person, that is why I did not accept his words with love and I reacted in a rush.

The purpose of examining oneself is to find a cure for your sins and to be circumspect in your spiritual life. “See then that you walk circumspectly.” (Ephesians 5:15)

**Warning:** Remembering our sins is beneficial but we need be warned here of something the devil might use to harm us. Sometimes, when one remembers his sins, the devil leads one back to the atmosphere of sin and excites his emotions. This happens in the case of the following sins: lust of the flesh, wrath, hatred and vainglory. Our church prays in the Divine Liturgy, “Purify us from all lust, deceit, hypocrisy, all evil deeds, and the memory of evil that entails death.” As soon as you realize that the devil is fighting you in this respect, stop such thoughts immediately. If the devil fights you again, stop this method and use a different one.

**When Do You Examine Yourself?** The best time is:

1. Immediately after sinning so you would feel sorry and repent right away.
2. At the end of the day, so that you may start a new life the next day.
3. Before confession in front of the priest, so that your confession may be complete.
4. At the end of the week, so on the weekend you might have rest for the body and comfort of the soul.
5. At the end of the year: If we had behaved in God's fear and felt how much He helped us during the year, we say thankfully, "You crown the year with Your goodness, And Your paths drip with fatness." (Psalms 65:11) But if our life had not been acceptable in His eyes, and the tree of our life carried only leaves and not fruits, we remember the voice crying in the wilderness, "And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." (Matthew 3:10) We supplicate the Lord saying, "Sir, let it alone this year also." (Luke 13:8)

St. Gregory the Theologian mentioned that the Christians used to do their yearly self-examinations during Epiphany because they renewed the covenant, which they had made with God when they were baptized.

**End self-examination with a Prayer:** After you sit with yourself to examine it, lift up your heart to God either confessing your sins and asking for forgiveness, or thanking Him for His grace and help - asking Him to help you to the end. When you examine yourself immediately after you committed a sin, lift up your heart to God either in sorrow and repentance or in thankfulness even if you are in a public crowded place.

## **2. Think of the Consequences of Sin:**

Think of the consequences of sin that we have talked about previously in this chapter. **You have to realize that sin insults God, separates you from Him,** deprives you of your peace, and brings God's wrath upon you. That is why the saints used to weep for their sins. David, a great king, used to wet his bed with his tears every night because of a sin, which he had committed. He, the great Psalmist, said, "My sin is ever before me." (Psalms 51:3)

Sometimes we try to forget our sins and comfort ourselves by outer artificial means such as going to a recreational place. Remember your sins and cry and repent. Your tears will wash your sins. St. John Chrysostom said, "If you remember your sins, God will forget them; but if you forget them, God will remember them."

## **3. Comfort and Salvation Are Found Only in Jesus:**

Know that true comfort and perfect joy and peace that passes all understanding cannot be obtained except from Jesus Who said, "**Come to Me all you who labor and are heavy laden, and**

**I will give you rest.**” (Matthew 11:28) He gave His disciples perfect peace and left to all believers a permanent holy gift, “Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you.” (John 14:27)

**Be sure that salvation from sin and its dominion is only through Jesus Christ**, by believing in His name, His power, His help, by hoping for His mercy, and by using all the means of salvation which the church has laid for us. “Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:12) No matter how much you struggle against sin or try to overcome your bad habits, you cannot succeed without the help of Jesus Christ Who said, “For without Me you can do nothing” (John 15:5)

Hence, do not depend on your will, your wisdom or your spiritual knowledge, but on the strong hand of God. Let God be everything in your life and remember the words of the Psalmist, David, “Unless the LORD builds the house, They labor in vain who build it; Unless the LORD guards the city, The watchman stays awake in vain.” (Psalms 127:1)

#### **4. Think How Trivial And Vain the World is:**

You have to realize that the world is “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” (Ecclesiastes 1:2) **Use the world but do not let the world use you.** Live in the world but do not let the world live in your heart. Many great people and kings departed, but where are they now? If you go to the graves, can you distinguish the bones of a king from the bones of an ordinary man?

Do not let the glory of this vain world distract you from the salvation of your soul or tempt you. The devil dared even to tempt Jesus. “He showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and said unto Him, “All these things will I give You” Jesus said unto him, “Away with you Satan!” (Matthew 4:9-10) The glory of this world is compared to a lamp, which attracts the beautiful butterflies, which dance merrily around it, but soon they fall inside it and are burnt. Remember the parable of the foolish rich man who told himself, “Eat, drink and be merry.” The Lord told him, “You fool! This night your soul will be required of you” (Luke 12:19-20)

#### **5. Know How Valuable Your Soul Is:**

**If you knew the value of your soul you would not neglect its salvation nor postpone your repentance.** Your soul is worth more than the whole world. Jesus 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?” (Matthew 16:26) The price of your soul is the blood of Jesus Christ, which was shed for your salvation. It is pathetic that some people do not care for their souls. If their shoes or clothes get dirty, they hurry to clean them, but they never care about cleaning their souls and straightening their ways. We live now in the age of mercy, but tomorrow you shall be in the age of justice. If you insult justice here, you may ask for mercy; but if you do not care for mercy here, what will be your status there?

## **6. Do Not Postpone Repentance:**

**Never postpone your repentance for there are many in hell now, who had departed from this world while they still had the hope of repenting sometime in the future.** Beware of doing like the five foolish virgins whom when the bridegroom came and found not ready, and the door was shut, they cried in vain, “Lord, Lord open to us.” The answer was, “Assuredly, I say to you, I do not know you.” (Matthew 25:11-12) Remember also the rich man, who as his ground brought forth plentifully, thought of enriching his barns and never thought of his salvation. He said to himself, “Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink, and be merry.” (Luke 12:16-20) God’s immediate response was, “You fool, this night your soul shall be required of you.”

Solomon said, “To everything there is a season, A time for every purpose under the heaven.” (Ecclesiastes 3:1) When is then the time for repentance? It is not old age, for salt is put on meat to preserve it, but what is the use of salt after the meat has been spoiled? It is of no use postponing repentance until you get old, after the smell of sin has been diffused. It is mentioned that one of the skillful photographers began drawing the picture of a human being starting from his feet. But soon he realized that the space provided was not sufficient to include the head, so the picture appeared without the head. Likewise, some people postpone repentance, which is the head. Neither a picture without a head is expressive nor life without repentance acceptable? One of the fathers said, "Repentance is the mother, look after the mother, it will produce children." He meant virtues.

**One might say, “Why not postpone repentance?”** The answer is that probably during the period in which you postponed repentance, you discover new ways of sinning which you come to like more and you might not become enthusiastic about living a holy life any longer. How do you know that your eagerness to lead a pure, holy life will remain with you in the future? During that period, your ideas and outlook on life might change and you might think that it is very hard to apply the Christian principles in this world. Again, during that period, your will power might weaken.

## **7. Beware of Despair:**

**Sometimes, when you remember your sins, the devil may lead you to despair.** Look to your Master in His love to sinners. Remember His picture opening His arms, calling everyone to comfort, regardless of his sins, to free him from the bonds of the devil. Do not be afraid “for you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption, by whom we cry out, “Abba, Father.” (Romans 8:15) Ask God to grant you repentance. “Restore me, and I will return, For You are the LORD my God.” (Jeremiah 31:18)

**The request surely acceptable to God is the request for the salvation of your soul.** This request is according to God’s will as St. Paul says, “For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God, our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” (1 Timothy 2:3-4) I might make requests to God but He does not answer them as He knows that they are not good for my salvation, even when these requests were for certain virtues. God knows that such virtues are above my spiritual status and will lead me to pride, which God does not want. However, God will always accept the prayer for your salvation because this is His will. Mar Isaac said, “There is nothing more favorable and acceptable in the sight of God than a person praying for the forgiveness of his sins.”

We have seen one kind of despair. Another kind is the one by which the devil tries to complicate God's way, tempting us with monotony and boredom. Nevertheless, we have to know that God's way is not covered with roses. It is enough that Jesus described it as narrow and straight, "Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads unto life." (Matthew 7:14) At the beginning of the life of repentance, many might retreat. God led the Israelites out of Egypt, but as soon as they arrived in the wilderness, they started thinking back of the material blessings they had in the land of Egypt. They preferred the garlic they ate in the land of bondage to the food of the angels as they were free in the wilderness.

**In our spiritual life, there is an important principle; the principle of "Struggle":** do not expect comfort and ease. If this were so, one would have not fasted, prayed or struggled in spiritual battles. Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven suffers violence and the violent takes it by force." (Matthew 11:12) Also, St. Paul said, "You have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin." (Hebrews 12:4) The more we struggle in the life of repentance, the more God's help is granted to us. Mar Isaac said, "As much as one struggles and overcomes himself for the sake of God, as much as the divine help surrounds him and makes his struggle easy."

**God's way does not remain that difficult, for God's promises encourage us and His inner voice supports us.** When God sees our perseverance in overcoming our weaknesses for His love, He fights for us and stops all the temptations. St. Macarius, the Great, said, "The more one strives for God's sake, even if he forces himself unwillingly to do God's will, the more chances that one day he will do it willingly and happily." St. Sefemeecky said, "Those who want to follow God's way have to struggle greatly at the beginning and eventually they will be very joyful; like the ones who want to start a fire, at first their eyes will be full of smoke, but later, they will enjoy the fire."

## **8. All Sins Can Be Forgiven:**

Every sin, no matter how evil it is, can be forgiven as long as one has a sincere intention to repent. **"Assuredly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemes they may utter; but he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is subject to eternal condemnation."** (Mark 3:28-29) Blaspheming against the Holy Spirit which is never forgiven is not a sin by itself. It is a spiritual condition, which a person reaches. He wants to do evil and keeps being stubborn, not listening to the rebukes of the conscience and the Holy Spirit.

It is different from committing adultery, killing, or stealing. Any person may commit the worst sins or he may even blaspheme against the Son of God unbelievably. St. Paul did that before God renewed his life. All this can be forgiven by the influence of the Holy Spirit Who leads us to repentance. But he who refuses the work of the Holy Spirit does not listen to the voice of his conscience will not be granted the forgiveness of his sins forever. He has refused all the means which rebuke him. "And when He (the Holy Spirit) has come, He will convict the world of sin." (John 16:8) The Holy Spirit reproves me of my sins. Hence, if I refuse His work or blaspheme against Him, I will never repent and will never be forgiven. **Mar Isaac said, "There is no sin that cannot be forgiven except the one without repentance."**

## 9. Beware Of Carelessness:

After having discussed God's great mercy and His love to sinners and His readiness to accept even the worst of them, we now draw your attention to an important point: Do not take advantage of God's great mercy and kindness, lest this should lead you to carelessness. **God is not only merciful, but He is just as well.** "His tender mercies are over all His works" (Psalm 145:9) yet He is still just.

St. John Chrysostom said, "You who do not believe in eternal punishment, tell me who killed with the flood all the people in Noah's time? Who burnt Sodom, Gomorrah, and seven other cities? Who drowned Pharaoh and all his soldiers in the Red Sea? Who killed the six hundred thousand Jews in the wilderness? Who burnt Abiram? Who ordered the earth to open its mouth and swallow Korah, Dathan and Abiram? Who killed seventy thousand in David's time? Who killed eighty-five thousand of the Assyrians in one night? Therefore, never take advantage of God's mercy. Remember what Jesus said about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices, and about the eighteen upon whom the Tower of Siloam fell, "Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." (Luke 13:3)

We live now in the age of mercy, but tomorrow we will be in the age of justice and there is a big difference by which God treats people in both ages. God was incarnate and granted us eternal redemption; and He is coming again in His glory to judge the living and the dead and to reward everyone according to his deeds.

In His first coming, "He made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a servant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross." (Philippians 2:7-8) In His first coming, He came as a shepherd seeking the lost sheep; but in His second coming, He will come as a judge, in His glory and the glory of His Father surrounded by all the angels and saints.

In His first coming, no man shall hear His voice in the streets; a bruised reed shall He not break and smoking flax shall He not quench. However, in His Second Coming, He will come in His glory with the song of the trumpet and the falling of the planets. In His first coming, He was long suffering, kind to sinners, did not condemn them, although He is the Judge. He even said to the adulterous woman, "Neither do I condemn you." (John 8:11) When a man asked Him for dividing the inheritance with brother, He answered, "Man, who made Me a judge or an arbitrator over you?" (Luke 12:14) He endured the blasphemers, forgave those who insulted Him. However, in His Second Coming, He will come as a just judge giving everyone according to his deeds.

In His first coming, He came as a Bridegroom to Whom we were all engaged. He said to everyone in love and meekness, "Listen O daughter, consider and incline your ear, forget your own people also, and your father's house, so the King will greatly desire your beauty." (Psalms 45: 10-11). He compared us to the virgins who are waiting for the Bridegroom and He paid His precious blood as an expensive dowry. In His Second Coming, He will come as a King conquering the rebellious. He had sent apostles and missionaries of peace. The sinners did not listen to them and killed them. In the Second Coming, He comes to judge the world. "For the hour is coming in the which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and shall come forth – those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation." (John 5:28-29)

On this day, what will the sinners do? “And the kings of the earth, the great men, the rich men, the commanders, the mighty men, every slave and every free man, hid themselves in the caves and in the rocks of the mountains, and said to the mountains and rocks: “Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of His wrath has come and who is able to stand?” (Revelation 6:15-17).

But thanks be to God Who is very patient with us and Who gives us a chance to repent and bring forth fruits. He lifted the axe kindly on the root of the tree and said, “Leave it another year.” Let us all repent for the days are evil and let us all wake from our carelessness for the day of our life is far spent.

## F) QUESTIONS

### 1. Are There Stages In Repentance?

The repentance of some of the saints, like St. Augustine and St. Moses the Strong, were sudden and perfect because of God’s grace and the readiness of their hearts. However, the common procedure is that the repentant go through certain stages.

**The first stage:** Contrition for sin as we discussed earlier.

**The second stage:** Struggling with sin. When someone is sorry for his sins, this does not mean that the devil will not tempt him any more. The devil will fight him but all his attempts will fail. The devil will try to remind him of his previous sins and his past life. The repentant have to be very watchful for all the temptations of the devil during this stage. He has to surround himself with a pure environment. If he is tempted by sin, he should get away from it. St. Paul called this stage, “The flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another.” (Galatians 5:17)

**The third stage:** Mental victory over sin. We mean that he is convinced that sin, with all its means and ways, is wrong. No doubt, this is considered victory for him.

This does not mean that the repentant has completely rid himself of sin, but there may still be an inner struggle to forsake it from his heart. In this stage, the repentant needs certain kinds of struggle and spiritual exercises upon which he trains himself under the guidance of the spiritual father.

All of these steps do not mean that the repentant have reached a perfection of repentance, for this means the hatred of sin. This is what St. Paul said, “Abhor what is evil.” (Romans 12:9)

**2. Life with God is characterized with joy, while that of repentance, by regret and sadness because of sin.** Is there contradiction between the two?

There is no contradiction between being joyful and being sorrowful in the life of the repentant. He is sorrowful but hopeful at the same time. He is happy because he is returning to God. Hope is a great Christian virtue besides faith and love. (1 Corinthians 13:13) The sorrow of the repentant should be mingled with hope and hope produces joy, peace, and quietness.

The repentant is sad because he feels he has insulted God and has met His great love with ingratitude, but at the same time, he put God's promises of accepting the sinners joyfully and that Jesus Christ came not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.

Moreover, the joy that fills the heart of the repentant is the result of his feeling that he has reached God himself, God who has revealed Himself to him and has rebuked him on his sins and lit for him the road of life. When the repentant reads St. Paul's words that he was earlier a persecutor of the church, and the words, "Where sin abounded, grace abounded much more," (Romans 5:20) he feels embarrassed in front of God's great love and compassion and how he had treated God's blessings with his sins. Therefore, his eyes are filled with tears, that of a broken heart from God's great love, and that of joy for His wonderful salvation.

## **G) MODELS OF REPENTANT PEOPLE**

### **1. David the Prophet and King: (2 Samuel 11-12)**

David looked at a woman who was bathing and his heart was filled with lust and he could not resist sin. Sin enslaved him without pity and made him fall in two terrible crimes: the sins of adultery and killing. However, God's great mercy interfered and sent him Nathan, the prophet, to rebuke him. David then confessed his sin in humility and with a broken heart. God accepted his true repentance by forgiving him. Nathan told David, "The LORD has put away your sin; you shall not die." (2 Samuel 12:13) **In spite of that, David wept for his sins and wet his bed with his tears.** He cried out saying, "My sin is ever before me."

### **2. St. Moses the Strong (or St. Moses the Ethiopian) (Fourth Century):**

**He started his life as a murderer, a robber and a gang leader but ended his life as a great saint and a spiritual leader to thousands of saints.** One day, while he was walking in the Nitria Valley, probably escaping from the authorities, he found himself in front of an old saint. He was bored from his life of robbery and murder so his heart was open to the words of the saint. He decided to repent and stay in the wilderness of Sheheat. He longed for the monastic life, so he went to his spiritual father, St. Isidoros, and confessed his sins. He struggled in his ascetic life. He was very harsh on himself, trying to make up for what had passed from his life in sin and evil. Even his spiritual guide used to advise him to be less severe in his struggle. Many became his disciples and he was well known all over the wilderness. His body lies beside his spiritual father in the Baramous Monastery.

### **3. St. Augustine (354-430 A.D.):**

He was one of the greatest teachers in the East and West. He was an author, a writer, a philosopher, **a bishop and the saint whose repentance had exceeded his sins and his holiness**

**exceeded the ignorance of his youth.** His mother was a righteous Christian who taught him the principles of Christianity and spiritual life since his early childhood. However, as soon as he finished his preparatory school years, under the influence of atheist teachers, he started forgetting the principles of religion. In addition, his reading of many books by atheist philosophers influenced his life greatly until he deviated and indulged in adultery. After he repented, he said, “I used to be ashamed of not doing evil.” However, his righteous mother did not stop praying with tears for him. When St. Ambrose saw her weeping, he told her, “The son of these tears cannot perish.”

**He knew God’s way at the age of thirty-three and started the life of repentance and tears.** His mother died after she rejoiced at the repentance of the fruit of her womb. Then he sold his possessions and distributed the money to the poor and became a monk. He started the ascetic life, prayer, study, writing and ministry of the Word and Church. He was ordained a priest, then a bishop of one of the cities of North Africa and became one of the greatest philosophers of Christianity and very famous in Bible commentary. He also struggled in defending the faith and answering the heretics. He became an authority in the Christian dogma in his generation. His numerous books are in our hands. In one of his famous books, “Confessions,” we read his excellent phrase, “Lord, You have created us for You and our hearts will remain restless till we find our comfort in You.”

#### **4. St. Baiesa (Fourth Century):**

She was born in the town of “Menouf” in Egypt, from rich, righteous parents. She followed their example in righteousness. When they died, she made her house a refuge for strangers and the needy. She spent all her money on the poor. However, some evil people influenced her to change her house into a house of prostitution. The elders of Sheheat heard about her and were very sad, so they sent St. John the Short to her. As soon as he saw her, he said, “Why did you insult your Lord Jesus Christ and bring this evil matter to your house?” She was troubled from his words and her heart was touched.

Then St. John looked to the ground and started weeping. She asked him, “Why do you weep?” He told her, “Because I see the devils playing on your face.” She asked him, “Can I repent?” He said, “Yes, but not in this place.” She answered, “Take me wherever you want.” She hurried after him until they entered the wilderness. When it was dark, he told her, “You stay here,” and he went farther away from her.

While he was praying at midnight, **he saw a pillar of light descending from heaven to the earth and the angels of the Lord carrying her soul.** He approached her and found her dead. He wanted to know whether her repentance was accepted by God and that she was saved. He prayed to God to reveal her secret to him. **Then he heard a voice telling him, “Her repentance was accepted on the same hour she had repented more than those who repented for many years and did not show such fervent repentance.”** After the elders buried her body, he told them what had happened and they glorified God. The Coptic Church celebrates her departure on 2<sup>nd</sup> day of the Coptic month Misra.

#### **5. St. Mary the Egyptian (First half of the fifth century):**

She left her father's house at the age of twelve to live in sin and evil in the city of Alexandria. She lived seventeen years in adultery. One day she saw a ship sailing to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast of the Cross. She went on just to satisfy her dirty lusts.

In Jerusalem, she tried to enter the church to receive a blessing from the holy cross, as other Christians were doing. She felt an invisible hand preventing her from entering the church. She tried several times but all her attempts failed. Suddenly, she felt how terrible her life was and she started crying bitterly in front of St. Mary's icon and promised God to devote the rest of her life to worshipping God in the wilderness. Then she was able to enter the church and receive the blessing from the holy cross.

She left this church and went to another where she confessed to the priest and received communion. When she was 29 years old, she went to the wilderness of the Jordan. She lived there a life of repentance for 47 years, worshipping God very piously fighting the devil who was tempting her very harshly. She progressed in the spiritual life and God granted her to prophecy and know the future. She did not meet any person until the last year of her life when she met father Zosima who gave her the Holy Communion before she departed.

#### **6. Deacon Habib Farag (1941):**

I have known this man who was a servant in Sunday school. **He started his life away from God but ended his life a righteous man who wrote in his diary the date and hour of his departure.** He started his life a stubborn person completely against religion, who lived to the world and for the world. One of the youth kept inviting him to attend the Bible Study meeting at St. Antony's Church in Shoubra, but he refused constantly. Finally, one day he accepted to go to the church on condition that no one would ask about him if he did not want to attend the meeting again.

He was touched by the words he heard at the church meeting and he saw a strange vision that night. He saw St. Mary taking him to Hades where everyone was suffering and crying. He became terrified and asked to get out of that place. Then St. Mary took him to the Paradise where he saw the saints shining. St. Mary started pointing at the saints, saying: "This is our father Abraham, this is David the Prophet, this is St. Antony, etc. He noticed that the saints were sitting on strange lighted chairs. One of these chairs was empty. He asked surprisingly, "Who left his chair empty?" St. Mary answered him, "This is your chair if you follow Jesus Christ."

He woke up determined to repent and to reach that chair which was waiting for him. He started his spiritual struggle very severely. He worked in the government and stayed there until he departed at a young age. God was glorified in his short life by many miracles. Many saw a great light surrounding him while he was praying in his own room and his hands lifted up were like lit candles. Finally, he departed at the age of twenty-seven.

## H) FROM THE SAYINGS OF THE FATHERS ABOUT REPENTANCE

### 1. St. Ephrem the Syrian:

My fathers and brothers let us hear a saying, which saves our souls. Let us buy the salvation of our souls. Let us find eternal life. Fill your eyes with tears, then the eyes of your minds will open. Come, all of you, rich and poor, employers and employees, old and young, girls and boys, anyone who wants to be saved from the eternal punishment and inherit eternal life.

Let us say with David; “Open my eyes so I may see wonders out of Your law.” “Enlighten my eyes lest I die.” Let us cry with the blind man, “O Son of God, have mercy on me.” If people try to stifle us, let us scream louder so that Jesus opens the eyes of our hearts because He is the Giver of Light. Draw near Jesus, come closer to Him and be enlightened and your faces will not be ashamed.

**Let us repent, my brethren, as long as we have time. You have heard what Christ said, “There is great joy in heaven over one sinner who repents.” O sinner, why are you late, do not lose hope. If there is great joy in heaven if you repent, why are you weary? The angels will be happy, so why are you slow? The Lord of the angels wants you to repent and you flee away! The Holy Trinity to Whom is due the worship, is calling you and you are still late!**

Everyone will be rewarded according to his deeds at the day of judgement. Everyone will reap what he sowed. We all have to stand bare in front of the throne of Christ and everyone has to give an account for himself and no one can help the other in that hour. The parents cannot help their children or the children their parents, nor can friends or brothers or husbands or wives help each other.

**Why do we not get ready while we still have time?** Why do we neglect the Holy Books and the words of Christ? Or do you think His sayings and the sayings of the saints will not condemn you on that day if you do not keep them? You have heard what the Lord said to His disciples, “He, who hears from you, hears from Me. He who does not hear from Me, I do not condemn him but the word itself will condemn him on the last day.”

Blessed are those who are thirsty and hungry, for they shall be filled. Woe to the full for they shall be hungry and thirsty. Blessed are those who are poor and mourn for they shall be comforted. Woe to those who laugh now for they shall weep. Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy. Woe to those who have no mercy.

He who came down from the bosom of the Father and became a Way for salvation teaches us repentance by His divine voice, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repent.” (Mark 2:17) These are not my sayings, but they are the Lord’s sayings, so why do you neglect your life? If you know that your thoughts and deeds are evil, why do you keep hiding your wounds? From whom are you afraid? Are you afraid from the Physician? He is not severe nor without mercy. He does not use a bitter medicine because he cures by mere words. If you want to come to Him, He is full of compassion and kindness. He came for you from the Father’s bosom. He was incarnated for you, so you may

proceed to Him without fear. He became a man for you to cure your hidden wounds. By His great love, He calls you, “O sinner, come and be cured easily. Remove the burden of your sins.” Supplicate God with tears, for this Good Heavenly Physician cures your wounds by tears and prayers! Do you know what hour the Heavenly Physician will close His door? I beg you to proceed and be cured, for He wants the Heavenly hosts to rejoice at your repentance.

O friend, until when are you going to serve the carnal desires and be enslaved to them? Till when are you going to do what pleases the devil? Listen to my advice and you will live. Purify your soul and body. Proceed to the Savior with a fervent repentance. Get away from the scorpion that bit you. Flee the serpent that you have experienced its poison for he, whose feet stumble twice, are blind and cannot see what should be avoided. Look at Nineveh, which was full of sin, how God had ordered its destruction. However, when He saw the people wearing ashes and ashes, in hunger, fasting and weeping, he had compassion on them, forgave them, and saved them. He preferred to go back in His words rather than to punish them.”

## 2. St. John Saba (The spiritual elder):

**O great mercy, how abundant you are! O Lord, can anyone not marvel from Your mercy? Can anyone not confess Your Grace? You came that we be born from the womb of repentance as You were born from the Blessed Virgin Mary Your mother.** We have lived in evil and wickedness but repentance can purify and enlighten us.

Adam can bear children from Eve, which resemble the physical world. Likewise, Jesus, from baptism and repentance, can bear children who resemble the spiritual world. He says to us, “Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand.” How can we find repentance if it is close? **Repentance is the mother of life, blessed is he who is born from it, he will never die.** Christ calls everyone to repent, but the devil prevents people from hearing that calling. Repentance saves those who are captives to sin.

**Repentance changes adulterers to celibates.** It is fire, which burns the weeds. It is the water for the holy plants. It is the intercessor of the captives. **Who is he who does not love you, O repentance; you carry all the blessings? Only the devil hates you for you have taken away his wealth, properties and made him empty from his inheritance which he once plundered.**

No one who puts his hope in you ever fails. No one ascended to heaven without you. Who can see God without repentance? Who repented and did not reap the fruits of joy? Who did not wipe his face with the tears of repentance and did not see God in his heart? You have saved David from sin and the people of Nineveh, even after God’s judgement on them.

Blessed are you O mother of forgiveness (Repentance). God has granted repentance to be the intercessor of sinners. God will never close His door if you ask Him, for He has given you the keys of the kingdom.

## **I) A PRAYER FOR REPENTANCE**

**By**

**Saint Shenouda the Archimandrite**

O God, forgive me, I am a sinner, for I cannot raise my eyes up to You because I am ashamed of my many sins. O God, forgive my sins and have mercy on me in Your kingdom. My Lord, I supplicate You and ask You for my wretched soul and body.

Lord, grant me to do Your will and let Your mercy guide me. My Lord and God, forgive my sins and hide my iniquities, save me from Your wrath and anger. What shall I say when I come between Your hand and what will justify me when You judge me? Lord Jesus, direct and shield me from the snares of the devil. Place Your peace and Your Holy Name in me, O Lord Who dwells in Heaven, so Your mercy might come and shield me. Do not deliver me in the hands of the enemy.

I have put all my worries on You, Jesus, Son of God, do not leave me. If I lean towards evil, do not forsake me and do not let me walk according to my evil desires. Do not delay rebuking me until the day of judgement. Do not punish me according to my sins. Cover the shame of my nakedness before Your fearful throne. Purify me, so I will not be defiled when I come before Your hands. O God, Lover of mankind, fortify my soul with Your precious blood. Lord, subdue my desire to sin by Your fear. Awaken me from the slumber of negligence that springs out of the sin. Keep me from going astray and the slip of my lips.

Let Your angel expel the blasphemies of sin. Prepare me so Your Holy Spirit might find me a temple for Him. Grant O Lord, my soul and spirit to praise You all the days of my life. Answer me O Lord according to Your great mercy and accept my prayer and supplication. Save me from sinning against You and grant me the way to do Your will. Do not take away Your blessings from me and do not keep me away from Your help.

Keep me a holy temple for You. Purify my heart, tongue and all my senses. Take away from me the stony heart and grant me a contrite one to worship You. Do not refuse me, for You have called me. Have mercy on me, You Who have the authority to grant mercy. Make me worthy to praise You all the time until my last breath.

Confirm Your holy words in my heart and soul. Save me from all the snares of the evil one. Direct my life to the way it pleases You. Have mercy on me and listen to my cry. Answer my supplication and accept my prayer. Accept my prayer and do not keep away Your mercy from me. Let my prayer reach Your presence. Listen to my voice and let my cries come to You. Let my prayer be upright before You as the aroma of sweet incense in Your Hands. Do not judge Your servant for no one is faultless before You. For Yours is the kingdom, the power, and the Glory, forever. Amen.

## **J) A PRAYER TO DECIDE ON LIVING WITH GOD**

O Holy Father, Who does not wish anyone to perish but all to repent, I thank You for Your long suffering with my many sins and for bringing me to this hour.

How many times I promised to live in Your obedience and not to insult Your holy name but I broke my promise and went against Your commandments.

O merciful Lord Who made known His great love for the sinners in Your Son our Lord Jesus Christ, grant me the blessing to please You and to live in Your obedience to the end. Strengthen me, my God, for I am weak before my many enemies surrounding me. Lord, You know everything; You know that I love You, although my love is lukewarm.

Lord, I find no peace away from You, no rest except in living with You. There is no security or permanence for anything in this world for all pass away. Blessed are You O Lord Who is faithful in Your love and who does not change.

O Heavenly Father, in my weakness, naughtiness, and reckless thinking, I put myself into Your hands confident of Your protection, believing that You are capable of keeping me until the end. Seal, O God, my covenant with Your blessings and keep me undefiled until Your second coming for Yours is the Glory from now and forever. Amen.

# **CONFESSION**

**"And many who had believed  
came confessing and telling their deeds."  
(Acts 19:18)**

- A) Importance of Confession and Its Blessings**
- B) The Three Elements of Confession**
- C) General Guidelines**
- D) Prayers Before and After Confession**

## A) IMPORTANCE OF CONFESSION AND ITS BLESSINGS

Now that we have discussed the life of penance, its value and blessings, we can proceed with the first practical step, which is confession.

The Sacrament of Confession has many blessings and is of great importance in building the spiritual life. Our blessed Church has been performing it faithfully since the Apostolic Age. (Acts 19:18) It is also mentioned in the writings of the early fathers like Dionysius (St. Paul's Disciple), Erianaos, Athanasius, Basil and St. John Chrysostom. Famous theologians such as Tertulian and Origen spoke of the importance of confession.

In this chapter, we are going to discuss the spiritual rather than the dogmatic aspect of confession, its blessings and usefulness to the faithful.

If the church was performing the Sacrament of Confession in its early stages when faith was at its peak and life was simple and free of all complications, how much more can the need be in this day and age where life is so complex!

When we speak of the significance of the Sacrament of Confession, we are not being theoretical. **All those who practice confession faithfully and correctly experience its practical benefits - spiritually and physically.**

### Advantages of Confession

#### 1. From the Psychological Point of View:

Human nature has a need for expressing its shortcomings and it finds rest in confessing its fault. The conscience pushes us to confess our sins. We gain relaxation and comfort only when we do so. Confession helps us in ridding ourselves of psychological worries.

Through confession, the soul becomes clear - it sheds all its burdens. Our world is full of problems and confession helps us in dealing with them. These problems may have deep psychological effects on individuals, such as hatred for the society, developing hysteria or even committing suicide.

#### 2. From the Spiritual Point of View:

**a. When we confess, we receive through Jesus Christ, the gift of forgiveness of sins.** We cannot get this gift through any other way.

**b. Through confession, we are made worthy of receiving Communion** and of dwelling in Jesus Christ, "He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me and I in him." (John 6:56) Without confession, we are not worthy of this gift, as St. Paul said. (1 Corinthians 11:29)

**c. In confessing, we examine and purify our soul, thus,** we improve our spiritual life. Careful self-examination as well as the spiritual remedies offered by the priest, guide the confessor step by step in his spiritual life.

**d. When you reveal all your thoughts to the priest, this helps us in getting rid of them.** There is nothing the devil likes better than for us not to reveal our thoughts to the priest, because this is an indication that we need. Solomon said, “For if they fall, one will lift up his companion. But woe to him who is alone when he falls, for he has not one to help him up.” (Ecclesiastes 4:10) St. John Cassian said, “He who admits his thoughts cannot be deceived.” He also said, “Sin will stay as long as it is hidden in the heart.” Once sin is admitted, it is erased even before the priest gives an answer. When a serpent hiding in a hole is found, it escapes immediately. So do evil thoughts, when revealed, escape instantly.

**St. Macarius the Great** once asked the devil how well he was doing with the monks in the desert. The devil answered, “Very badly. Every evil thought I tell them, they admit to their priests, except one monk, who is my friend because he never confesses his thoughts to the priest.” St. Macarius went straight to advise the monk to confess all his thoughts to the priest. The monk obeyed. Later, St. Macarius met the devil and asked him, “How well are you doing?” The devil answered, “Very badly, even that friend of mine is no longer my friend.”

**e. Through confession, we find solutions to our problems.** An Egyptian monk once had a problem; he prayed and fasted for a solution. At the end, he decided to ask an elder. On his way, an angel met him, gave him an answer to his problem, and told him, “God gave you an answer to your problem because of your humble heart when you decided to ask that elder.” When Jesus healed the ten lepers He told them, “Go, show yourselves to the priest. And so it was that as they went, they were cleansed.” (Luke 17:11-14) Therefore, God wants to teach us that He is pleased when we submit to other humans who are appointed as God’s representatives. So, let us hurry and confess all our thoughts to our priest. In other words, let us complain about our enemy, the devil, to our father. Let us be like the little child, who, when bothered by someone, would say, “I will complain to my father.”

**f. Another great spiritual benefit is the discipleship.** Christian life is based on discipleship. The last commandment of our Lord Jesus was: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you.” (Matthew 28:19-20) Jesus taught us this principle for us to follow when He chose His twelve disciples.

Discipleship has many blessings because spiritual virtues cannot be attained through reading books or by listening to a speaker, but by being a disciple to a spiritual father who can guide and train. St. John Cassian said, “When we look at physical sciences and the subjects that require skill we find that it cannot be attained without the training by their masters.” Likewise, spiritual aspects of soul salvation and its growth to perfection need a spiritual father to guide, teach and train.

### **3. From the Social Point of View:**

Confession relieves the individual psychologically and saves him from spiritual mistakes that might make him non-adaptable to society. He will adjust better, be more cheerful toward life, doing his best at work and his production in society will multiply.

#### **4. From the Physical Point of View:**

Confession also has many blessings for our body, for we know from the Bible that sin is the cause of some illnesses, as in the case of the sick man of Bethesda. (John 5:14) Our church teaches that the sick person, to whom the priest will perform the sacrament of unction, has to confess his sins in order to be cured. In addition, modern science confirms the deleterious effects of psychological problems on the general health. As a result, a new branch of medicine called “Psychosomatic Medicine” has been established and taught in medical schools.

**Hence, confession cures the body** as well as **the spirit**, frees those who are tied with bad habits, and cures those who have psychological problems and those who cannot adjust well to the society. In short, it frees from the consequences of sin.

Some governmental agencies now appoint social workers in schools and other institutions to try to restore the deviations in the behavior of youth. In addition, the number of psychiatrists has increased tremendously to help those who are psychologically sick. Our church has known and performed what modern science now realizes. Our church has known and performed the Sacrament of Confession 18 centuries before psychoanalysis was discovered. The knowledge of the church about the Sacrament of Confession was merely based on obeying the commandments of God who created man and knows his inner soul and how to cure it.

Confession is not only a psychological treatment, it is an important church sacrament and psychological treatment is one of its advantages. Forgiveness of sins accompanies this sacrament. This gift cannot be offered by any psychological clinic in the world, even if its doctors are experts and believers.

## **B) THREE ELEMENTS OF CONFESSION**

### **First: Between Me and Myself.**

#### **The Importance of Repentance:**

Confession is the first practical step in repentance; being sincerely sorry for your sins should precede confession. The Sacrament of Confession, in our church, is called the Sacrament of Repentance. **Hence, confession is not just words you say to the priest, even if these words are truth, but rather it is repentance.** Some people who want to have communion go to the priest and ask him for forgiveness and when the priest asks them for their sins, they say, “Thank God, we have done nothing wrong,” or “We took communion last week or three days ago,” as if one does not sin in three days.

**St. Cyprian** (the 3<sup>rd</sup> century) **admonished those who came for communion without true repentance**, saying, “How do you receive communion without a true repentance and confession and the priest has not laid his hands on you?” We are not talking here about those who receive communion frequently and do not confess every day, but we are talking about those who do not care about confession and say, “Thank God, everything is alright.”

Those who hide their sins do not know themselves and are lying to God. St. John said in his epistle, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we say we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us.” (1 John 1:8-10) Those people do not benefit from the prayer of Absolution and furthermore, they add another sin which is taking communion without repentance **We have to be sure that the Absolution Prayer without confession and true repentance will not grant us forgiveness of sins.** When God sees our true repentance, He grants us forgiveness. King Solomon, after finishing building the Temple said, “Then hear from heaven Your dwelling place, and forgive and give to everyone according to all his ways, whose heart You know.” (2 Chronicles 6:30)

**Therefore, repentance is an important step in the Sacrament of Confession.** The confessor should feel that he has sinned against God Who loved him, he comes with a humble heart to ask forgiveness, promising not to sin anymore, asking God for power and help. David said, “I will declare my iniquity; I will be in anguish over my sin.” (Psalms 38:18) Jeremiah said, “A voice was heard on the desolate heights, Weeping and supplications of the children of Israel; For they have perverted their way, And they have forgotten the LORD their God.” (Jeremiah 3:21)

**Sit with Yourself.** A perfect confession, which is accompanied by true repentance, needs preparation before going to confess. This preparation is called, “examining yourself.” Sit in a quiet place and examine yourself. Compare how many blessings God has given you with how many times you have denied Him. Compare your life with the life of the saints.

Remember St. Peter’s words: “If the righteous one is scarcely saved, Where will the ungodly and the sinner appear?” (1 Peter 4:18) And say in your heart, “Yes, where shall I, a sinner, appear?” All this will give you a broken spirit and will renew your need for the grace of God. Examining

yourself will also help you remember your sins so you will never forget them. David, after he sinned, said, “My sin is ever before me.” (Psalms 51:3)

Sometimes we do not realize our sins; either we have forgotten them or because we do not examine ourselves and confess frequently, or because of carelessness in our spiritual life causing us to sin without feeling that we are sinning. In this case, we have to pray to God to reveal our sins for us. Ask the Holy Spirit to shine the light of His grace upon you and pray with St. Augustine saying, “Lord, grant that I know who You are and who I am.” Our compassionate Lord who is anxious for the salvation of everyone, Who is eager for the tears of the lost sheep, will then grant you to remember your sins.

At the end of this chapter, we have a list of questions, which may help you to confess. If you are that type of person who forgets easily, it is better for you to write down your sins on a piece of paper. If you are afraid somebody might read it, write down symbols not the details. After confession, tear that piece of paper because the Lord has torn away your sins.

**Sit with God:** When you feel the burden of your sins, pray to God with tears and sorrow. Confess to Him in detail. He knows all your sins before you even do them, but in confession, you admit your mistakes. David said, “When I kept silent, my bones grew old Through my groaning all the day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; My vitality was turned into the drought of summer. I acknowledged my sin to You, And my iniquity I have not hidden. I said “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,” And You forgave the iniquity of my sin.” (Psalms 32:3-5)

**In your prayer, speak to God in detail. Talk to Him in a singular form; not plural** for this will make you sense your mistakes more, instead of feeling that others also do the same mistakes. For example, when you pray in a personal relationship, do not say, “Lord forgive us our sins for you know that we are sinners and we are often weak and fall in sin.” Instead say, “Lord, forgive me my sins, for You know I am a sinner and I am often weak and fall in sin.”

## **Second: In Front of the Priest:**

**Shyness:** One of the main factors that hinder people from confession is being shy of admitting their sins in front of the priest. We have to overcome that obstacle, for confession is very beneficial in our spiritual life. As long as you were not shy in sinning in front of God, why are you shy now to admit your sin in front of God’s chosen one? **Although shyness is a difficult feeling, it is beneficial for you,** as it makes you feel how bad and shameful sin is. This feeling is important, for as long as you have enjoyed doing sin, it is better that you suffer in confessing your sins. Our fathers have said, “The Sacrament of Confession prevents us from sinning again.” Jesus Ben Sirach said, “Do not be ashamed in admitting your sins.”

**From Who are you shy? Why are you shy?** You have to know that priests have heard these and similar sins several times before from other people. The confessor should realize that the priest is used to hearing the bad rather than the good. **Shyness may cause some people to ask: “Why do we have to confess to a priest? Why not confess to God directly?”** One reason for such a question is pride. A person may appear as a saint in front of others and is so concerned with portraying a righteous character. Also, what we have mentioned earlier about the importance of the

Sacrament of Confession can answer that question. This is a trick from the devil that wants to deny us the blessings we receive from confession. So, do not listen to him and put away all shyness and pride, and let our main concern be how to obtain the great blessings of confession, which we cannot receive otherwise. .

## How to Confess?

**1. When you sit with the priest, forget your relationship to him and remember that he is God's representative,** God's steward to whom you are turning in the account of your sins. Remember that you are approaching to perform a sacred sacrament, which will renew your life. Do not mention your sins as if you are telling a story, but with awe and sorrow.

**2. Confess all kinds of sins:** Sins of deed, thought, or feeling, etc. **Remember that every sin you do not confess will remain worrying you even if you become a saint.** In brief, empty your heart from every sin. Jeremiah said, "Pour out your heart like water before the face of the Lord" (Lamentations 2:19)

A good illustration which can explain how we should empty our hearts of our sins is when you empty an oil jar or a honey jar. There always remain some particles at the bottom of the jar. When you empty a vinegar jar, the smell remains at the end. However, if you empty a jar full of water, nothing remains, not even the smell. The same way when you empty your heart during confession, no sin should remain.

**3. Say the details of sin:** This helps to show how shameful your sin is. Mention the place and time where you sinned, and if any, the person with whom you have sinned. If you confess in general without mentioning the details, this will not help you much. For example, you may say: "My father, I have not prayed as I am supposed to and I do not love people as God wants me to and I have not come for communion with proper respect." This type of confession will not tell the priest what kind of person you are because all persons, even the saints, can say such words, for any person who is growing in his spiritual life says such words.

Again, there is a difference between saying, "Father, I have looked with lust toward a girl," and "I have looked with lust toward a girl while I was in church." There is a difference in saying "I became angry when a person told me a word I misinterpreted" and "I hate that person, and I cannot stand him." The second confession reveals another sin, which is hatred, besides getting mad.

Therefore, telling the details of sin is very useful because the priest will better know your bad habits and behavior and will offer you the right advice and remedy.

**4. Emphasize also the duration of the sin:** Confess how often you do that kind of sin. Ask yourself, "Did I do that sin once only or it has become a habit, which I cannot control?"

**5. Confess your feelings while sinning:** Were you enjoying the sin or rejecting it?

**6. Do not give yourself excuses during confession:** Do not say, "The devil tricked me," to show that the devil is guilty and you are innocent. Do not forget that any sin you do, you do by

your own free will. Do not say, “That person annoyed me, therefore I became furious.” If he had made you mad, why were you not patient and where is your compassion that endures everything?

**7. Be honest in your confession:** Do not put your sin in a different light than what it actually is. For example, if a person, when asked what his religion is, denied that he is a Christian, he cannot consider that sin as a lying sin. There is a great difference between lying and denying your faith.

**8. Put emphasis also on the negligence in the positive aspects of your life and not nourishing your virtues.** St. James said, “**To him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin.**” (James 4:17) As a Christian, you should grow spiritually until you reach perfection and “the measure of stature of the fullness of Christ.” (Ephesians 4:13) If you are not growing, this means there is sin, which is hampering your growth. Therefore, you have to ask yourself if you are growing in Christian virtues like love, self-denial, chastity and worshipping. Find out how much you have neglected these virtues and confess your negligence.

**9. Do not think confession includes only your spiritual life. It also includes other aspects of life.** Jesus wants us to be perfect in everything. “You shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.” (Matthew 5:48) He also wants us to be faithful unto death. (Revelation 2:10) A student who is lazy in his studies should confess his laziness and an employee who is not giving his employer his money’s worth should confess his laziness.

**10. Confess your sins even if you know how to overcome them.** Never try not to confess some sins because you have heard much advice from your priest and you know the solution. Sometimes the devil tries to convince us that as long as we know the answer, there is no need to confess. **However, we still need to confess, even if we know the answer,** until we get rid of it. The river waters of Syria and Iraq seemed much better for Naaman the Syrian, but they were not as good to heal him as the Jordan waters which Elijah has told him. **God gives special power to the words of the priest that they may benefit the confessor.** Confession is not only for counseling, but also for receiving forgiveness.

**11. You have to be honest with your priest** and tell him everything frankly, even if it concerns him. For example, if he is fast in doing that sacrament and you do not like that, you should mention that to him, in a polite way.

**12. Listen well to the advice of your spiritual father and accept it.** If any of this advice troubles you, discuss it with him, as the patient should tell his doctor if the treatment made him well or did not help.

### **Third: The Absolution from Sin:**

**Prayers of Absolution: After you have made a complete confession before the priest, kneel in awe and respect saying, “Absolve me my father from the sins that I already confessed and the hidden ones too.”** Probably there are sins that you forgot to mention. Then the priest puts the cross on your head and prays the absolution.

It is useful that we record these prayers in this chapter in order to meditate on the beautiful meaning of these prayers. Then when you bow your head under your spiritual father, you feel the power of these words. **Prayers of Absolution are divided into three parts:**

### **The First Absolution**

Yes, Lord, **You have given authority** unto us to tread upon serpents and scorpions and upon all the power of the enemy. Crush his heads beneath our feet speedily. Scatter before us his **every design of wickedness that is against us.** For You are King of us all, O Christ Our Lord.

To You we send up the glory, the honor and the adoration together with Your good Father and the Holy Spirit the Life-Giver, Who is of one essence with You, now, and at all times, and to the age of ages. **Amen.**

### **The Second Absolution**

You, O Lord, who bowed the heavens, You descended and became man for the salvation of the race of men. You are He Who sits upon the Cherubim and the Seraphim, and beholds them who are lowly.

You also now, our Master, are He unto Whom we lift up the eyes of our hearts; the Lord Who forgives our iniquities and saves our souls from corruption. We worship Your unutterable compassion, and we ask You to **give us Your peace,** for You have given all things unto us.

Acquire us unto Yourself, God our Saviour, for we know none other but You; Your holy name we do utter. Turn us, God, unto fear of You and desire of You. Be pleased that we abide in the enjoyment of Your good things; and those who have bowed their heads **beneath Your hand,** exalt them in their ways of life. and adorn them with virtues. And may we all be worthy of Your kingdom in the heavens, through the goodwill of God, Your good Father, with Whom You are blessed, with the Holy Spirit, the Life-Giver, Who is of one essence with You, now, and at all times, and unto the age of all ages. **Amen.**

## **The Third Absolution** **(The Absolution of the Son)**

Master, Lord Jesus Christ, the Only-begotten Son and Logos of God the Father, Who has broken every bond of our sins through His saving, life-giving sufferings; Who breathed into the face of His holy disciples and saintly apostles, and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you will remit, they are remitted to them, and those which you will retain, they shall be retained.”

You also now, our Master, through Your holy apostles, have given grace to those who for a time labored in the priesthood in Your holy church, to forgive sin upon the earth, and to bind and to loose every bond of iniquity.

Also, we ask and entreat Your goodness, O Philanthropic One, for Your servants, (here he signs the people once and twice) my fathers, and my brethren, (here he signs himself) and my weakness; those who **bow their heads before Your holy glory**. Dispense unto us Your mercy, and loose every **bond of our sins**, and, if we have committed any sin against You, **knowingly or unknowingly, or through anguish of heart, or in deed, or in word, or from faintheartedness**, do, O Master, Who knows the weakness of men, as a good and Philanthropic One, O God, grant us the forgiveness of our sins; (he signs himself).

Bless us, (he signs the clergy) purify us; make us absolved, (he signs the congregation) and all Your people absolved. (Here he remembers those whom he wishes to remember.) Fill us with Your fear, and straighten us unto Your holy, good will, for You are our God, and the glory, honor, the dominion, and the adoration are due to You, together with Your good Father and the Holy Spirit, the Life-Giver, Who is of one essence with You, now, and at all times, and unto the age of all ages. **Amen.**

### **Comments (on the absolutions):**

The repentant feel that he is bowing his head not under the hand of a man, but under the hand of God. The priest says in the second absolution, “**Your servant who is bowing his head under Your hand.**”

The priest declares that he performs this sacrament only because of the Divine authority given to him when he says, “You have granted the clergy the power to forgive sins on earth.”

In the three absolutions, the priest does not ask for the repentant only, but also for himself. The priest asks that God grant the repentant many spiritual blessings, which are:

1. To remove the roots of evil from our souls, “Crush the heads of the enemies beneath our feet.” Head means its beginning.

2. To grant us His peace which we have lost by sin. Sin destroys the peace of man as fire to the straw.

3. To fill us with God’s fear. We notice here that when the priest asks for peace he says, “**Grant us Your peace,**” and when he asks for God’s fear he says, “**Fill us with Your fear.**” St.

Antony said, “The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord.” When light enters a dark house, it casts away its darkness. Likewise, when God’s fear enters the heart of man, it casts away his ignorance and teaches him all virtues and wisdom.

4. To bring back to us the desire to live with God. **“Bring us back to the path of fear and love for You.”** The taste of spiritual matter changes by sin as the taste of good food changes in the mouth of the sick person. Hence, the priest asks God to bring back this desire for God to become attracted to Him and not to sin. “Lead me away! We will run after You.” (Song of Solomon 1:4)

**The results of these absolutions are:**

1. **Forgiveness of sins:** committed intentionally or unintentionally.
2. **Forgiveness of sins:** all kinds of sins, whether in deed or word.
3. **Forgiveness of sins:** which we committed under all circumstances “through the agitation of our hearts or through littleness of heart.”
4. Blessing, purity and loosening of all the bonds of sin and its authority.

**After the absolution, be sure that God has forgiven your sins as Nathan the prophet told David after he confessed, “The Lord has put away your sin.”** (2 Samuel 12:13)

Proceed in love and submission and kiss the cross in the hand of the priest.

## **C) GENERAL GUIDELINES**

### **1. After Confession:**

**Following confession, it is better to go home alone thinking of what the Lord has done for you, and benefiting from this spiritual experience.** A common mistake many people do is to go to confession in a group and spend the time before confession joking and in a silly mood. That is not thinking of their sins and feeling sorry. Then after confession they walk home discussing the same things and not staying quietly with themselves.

**The confessor has to obey all that the priest has told him with accuracy and faithfulness because this advice is like medicine that the doctor prescribes to a patient.** There is no use for a sick person to go to a doctor and not taking the medicine that the doctor has prescribed.

**Do not lose hope if you sin again after confession, but go and confess again, for it is written, “A righteous man falls seven times and rise again.”** (Proverbs 24:16) God, Who knows how weak our nature is, gave us the opportunity to go and confess again every time we sin. **The door of repentance will remain open to the end of our lives, and blessed is the man who enters from it.**

### **2. One Spiritual Father:**

**Our church teaches that every person should have only one priest to go to for confession. Every confessor should continue confessing to that priest unless there are circumstances that prevent him, such as travel or the like.** In this case, the confessor has to take permission from his priest so he can confess to another priest. Therefore, you have to be very careful in choosing your priest. **You have to care only about your spiritual benefit. Never try to get away from your priest for an unholy reason or because you failed in overcoming sin.**

### **3. Changing the Spiritual Father:**

Sometimes, the repentant do not benefit from the spiritual advice, which his spiritual father gives him. Here the person asks, **“Can I change my spiritual father, or is this not allowed according to the church rules?”**

The spiritual father is like a physician. A sick person may not benefit from the treatment of one physician and he may go to a different physician. Moreover, the physician may ask the sick person to see another physician. Likewise, since the goal of confession is to benefit the repentant spiritually, he may change his spiritual father. As well, some priests refer their children with special problems to other priests so that by special grace they may help them with their problems.

In this case, the repentant have to take the permission of his spiritual father as a matter of courtesy.

This permission may create another problem because the repentant is shy to ask to change his spiritual father, after he had realized all his weakness. How can he face his father with that request?

If the repentant is the shy type, he may change his spiritual father without personal contact, but he may send him a letter telling him all the circumstances that led him to that decision and ask for his permission and for his prayers.

**In the case of changing the spiritual father, do you confess again all the previous sins that you have already said before your previous father?**

The repentant have received complete absolution from all the sins that he had already confessed; therefore, there is no need for him to confess again. There is one exception: when the previous sins have connection with his present sins, or if he wants to give his new spiritual father a true picture about his life in order to receive from him the correct treatment.

### **4. The Sin You Forgot to Mention:**

**What happens if you forget to mention a sin to your priest or if you have committed a sin after confession and before communion?**

Either you confess it before communion to any priest available at the church even if he is not your priest, or you may receive communion then later go to your priest and confess it. Anyway, this matter has to be arranged between you and your priest. We would like to remind you that this issue depends on the seriousness of the sin. If you are in doubt, it is better to wait until you have a chance to confess to your priest.

## **5. The Spiritual Guide:**

One may choose a spiritual guide beside his father of confession. A spiritual guide does not have to be a priest; he can be a layman who deals with general spiritual topics like prayer, humility, and condemnation, without getting into the details of your sins. A spiritual guide is like a teacher. He cannot grant you forgiveness of sins like the priest. You ask him about a specific issue or how to overcome a sin without confessing that you have committed that sin.

## **6. Forgiveness of Sins:**

**Are all your sins forgiven after you confess, even if they are very serious?** Of course, the answer is yes, as God's promises are clearly stated "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9) St. John Chrysostom said, "Have you sinned? Enter the church, confess and your sins will be erased. Repent any time you sin. If you sin again, repent again and never lose hope, for the church is a hospital and not a court; He does not condemn us for our sins."

## **7. Time of Confession:**

We emphasize that complete confession cannot be performed during the Holy Eucharist, but it has to be during special scheduled hours in order that the confessor will have ample time.

## **8. Frequency of Confession:**

The intervals between confessions may be determined between the priest and the confessor, according to the spiritual needs and the circumstances of the confessor. Of course, this interval should never be too long.

## **9. Immigrants and Confession:**

How can immigrants confess if they are in cities where there are no Coptic Orthodox Churches and no Orthodox priests?

No doubt, confession should be verbal in front of the priest who is God's steward, because often confession needs to be discussed and clarified so the priest can give the right solution and cure. However, in some cases, where immigrants are in places where there are no Orthodox Churches and no Orthodox priests, they still have to examine themselves and write their confessions in letters to their priests. This is very beneficial for them and when they meet any priest, they ask him to pray for them the absolution to receive forgiveness of sins.

## **A guide for examining one's self before confession**

A complete true confession is when you reveal yourself completely in front of your priest and when you feel that you have not hidden anything that you know about yourself from your priest. Hence, you have to examine yourself very thoroughly and accurately before confession. **These are some questions, which may help you to know and examine yourself before confession. They are classified into topics: some concerning worship, relationships with people, and others concerning the kinds of sins.**

## **A. Concerning Worship:**

### **Prayer:**

1. Do you neglect your prayers or are you regular in your prayers? Do you neglect them sometimes or completely? Why? Have you thought of a solution for it? What was the result?
2. When do you pray? When you wake up in the morning? Before sleeping? Before and after eating? Before leaving home? Before you start any work? In any trouble you face? Do you pray while you are on the road? While you are with people?
3. Do you have long private prayers where you have a private conversation with God? Are you regular in these prayers? Are these prayers growing or diminishing?
4. Do you pray with the psalms? Do you pray all the prayers of the Agbeya or some of them? Which ones do you pray? If you do not pray with the psalms, why?
5. Do you memorize the psalms and litanies from the Agbeya? Is this memorization growing or diminishing?
6. Do you pray with a fervent heart? Do you pray with tears at times? Do you feel the presence of God while praying? Are your prayers lukewarm or sometimes hot and sometimes lukewarm? Why?
7. Does your mind wander during praying? During which kind of prayers does your mind wander? In which kind of topics does your mind wander? Does this continue for any length of time? What have you done to remedy this problem?
8. What is the posture of your body during prayer? Do you stand and lift up your hands to God? Do you kneel? Do you bow? Do you have any other posture? Do you stand respectfully in front of God? Do you bend your feet or lean your body against a wall? Do you move your hands or do your eyes look at other things?
9. Are there any special topics that occupy your mind during praying? Do you pray for your sins and your spiritual life? Do you pray for others? Do you pray for those who bother you? Do you have material requests?
10. Do you give God your best time while you are fully active? Do you pray while you are physically and mentally exhausted?

### **Fasting:**

1. Do you fast all the fasting days of the church or just some of them? Which fasting days do you practice regularly? Do you fast Wednesdays and Fridays of every week? Are there any obstacles, which hinder your fasting? What are they?

2. Do you abstain from food during fasting? For how long?
3. Do you desire special kinds of food? Do you fulfill that desire? Do you ask that special kinds of food be prepared for you?
4. Do you spend much on food, in general and on its luxuries, specifically?
5. Do you eat between meals?

### **Giving Alms:**

1. Are you faithful in giving your tithes to God?
2. Do you only give your tithes or do you give generosity?
3. What is your feeling when you give? Is it a feeling of pride or a feeling of love toward Jesus' brothers?
4. Do you get annoyed sometimes by those who ask you for alms? Or do you give cheerfully?

### **Communion and Confession:**

1. Are you regular in receiving communion? When was the last time you received communion?
2. Are you regular in confession? When was the last time you confessed?
3. If you are negligent, what is the reason?
4. Do you feel that there is something you want to hide from your priest?
5. Do you prepare and examine yourself thoroughly before confession?
6. Are there repeated sins in your confessions? What have you done to overcome them?

### **Reading:**

1. Do you read the Bible regularly? Do you read in sequence?
2. Do you meditate in your readings? Do you write these meditations or just think about them?
3. Do you study the Bible? Do you read any commentaries?
4. Do you read other religious books? What kind do you read (spiritual, lives of saints, dogma, etc.)? Do you read regularly?
5. Do you read inappropriate books or magazines? Do you sometimes read topics that make you stumble?
6. What is the average time you devote to spiritual readings every day or every week?
7. Do you try to apply what you read to your life or do you train yourself with spiritual exercises?

### **Metanoias (Prostrations):**

Do you do metanoias, that is, **bowing before God while asking for forgiveness**? How many do you do? Are they accompanied by short prayers?

## **Going to Church:**

1. Do you go to church and attend the Divine Liturgy regularly? If there are obstacles in your way, what are they?
2. Do you attend the Divine Liturgy while fasting?
3. Do you come early to the Divine Liturgy? Do you attend all of the prayers?
4. Do you attend other meetings besides the Divine Liturgy, like the vesper service, sermons, youth meetings, Sunday school, etc.? Do you attend them regularly?
5. Do you serve in the church? Are you faithful in your service? Are there any problems that bother you?

## **Spiritual Exercises:**

1. Do you have spiritual exercises? What are they? Are you successful in applying them? If not, what are the reasons for your failure?
2. Are there any virtues, which you would like to attain?

## **B. Your Relationship with People:**

1. Do you have good relations with people, old, young, family members, colleagues, or others? If not, why?
2. Have you been angry with someone? For what reason?
3. Was your anger suppressed or apparent? Did you raise your voice? Did you say any words that hurt others? Did you insult them or fight with them?
4. Did your anger go away fast or did it remain for a long time? For how long? Did you have bad thoughts because of your anger? Did your anger leave any bad feelings toward any person? Did this anger change to hatred for a period? Did this anger remain in your heart as enmity with someone?
5. If you were angry with someone, have you reconciled with him? Did you initiate this reconciliation or did others interfere? How long did this enmity last? Is everything alright now?
6. Is there anyone who offends or makes you angry? What is your reaction toward him outwardly? Inwardly?
7. To what extent do you have virtues such as perseverance, longsuffering, forgiving, and loving your enemies?
8. Do you sometimes hurt others even by joking, through ignorance, or by being forgetful? What have you done to overcome this matter? Have you apologized to those whom you hurt?
9. Do you hurt others with the excuse of defending the truth? How did you hurt them?
10. What are the obstacles toward the virtue of meekness in your behavior?
11. Do you abuse the rights of anyone? Do you perform all your duties toward everyone faithfully, whether in the family, at work, in church or in your social relations?
12. Do you keep bad company? With whom? What sins do you commit because of this bad company? Do you have friends who drive you away from the church and from God's love?
13. Are your financial relations with people good? Were you unjust with anyone? Did you cheat anyone?

14. Do you perform your financial obligations toward God; the virtue of giving alms? What is your reaction toward tithes the first fruits and participating in the needs of the church?

15. Are you humble in treating other people or do you treat anyone with pride?

16. Do you behave violently toward others or treat them unkindly? On the other hand, are you calm, merciful and moderate? Are you passive? What kinds of sin do you commit due to your passive nature?

17. Do you love to have people praise you? Do you seek that? How? What is your feeling if someone rebukes you, ignores you, rejects you, or does not treat you appropriately?

18. Do you try sometimes to pretend before people to be the opposite of what you are?

19. Is your behavior an obstacle to others?

20. Do you serve others and tire yourself for others' comfort?

## **C. Some Kinds of Sin:**

### **Sins of the Tongue:**

1. What are the sins that you commit with your tongue? Do you lie, judge others, "blaspheme, swear, insult, humiliate someone, bad humor, silly discussions, or any inappropriate talk, etc."?

2. With whom have you sinned? And to whom? How many times (if possible) and for what reason? Did this matter become a habit?

3. Have you thought of overcoming those sins? How? What was the result?

4. Are you very talkative? Do you talk about subjects that you do not understand? Do you feel that you waste your time in useless talking instead of talking about something more useful?

5. Do you sing worldly songs? Do you sometimes use words that are inappropriate for God's children to use?

6. Is your voice loud or harsh? Do you think before you talk? Do you interrupt during discussions? Do you make mistakes while discussing something?

7. Do you interfere in other people's business? Do you give your opinion even if you are not asked? Do you like to be always critical of others, rebuke and advise others, even those who are older than you, those who are strangers or even who do not accept your advice?

8. Have you trained yourself to be silent? What are the results?

### **Sins of Thought:**

1. What kinds of sins do you fall into by your thoughts? Is it adultery, lust, thoughts of wrath, hatred, revenge, judging others, thinking evil, pride, envy, blasphemy, doubt or daydreaming?

2. Does this thought stay with you for a long period? For how long?

3. Does such thought come to you from outside and you do not like it but try to cast it away or do you welcome the thought, enjoy it, and try to build on it other thoughts?

4. Does the thought change into lust and tempt you to actually sin? Every time you sin by thought, do you also sin by deed?

5. Is your mind occupied with cares of this world, its many problems and worries?

### **Sins by Senses:**

What are the sins that you fall into by your senses; by sight, hearing or touch? Do you fall in adultery by your senses? Do you desire what others have? Do you spy on others? Do you listen to dirty jokes and words?

### **Sins of the Heart:**

1. Are there any desires and feelings of your heart that do not please God? Is there in your heart any envy, jealousy, hatred, desire to be rich, desire for high positions, love of authority, pride, love of the world vain glory, love of the flesh, or love of revenge?

2. Is there in your heart any wrath, complaint, provoking, despair, or sadness?

3. Do these feelings and desires appear in your daily life, in your thoughts and your dreams?

### **Sins of Deed:**

1. What are the actual sins you have committed? What commandments have you broken: adultery, stealing, killing, fighting, and drinking, rebellion, negligence, bad habits, etc.?

2. How many times have you repeated sin? With whom have you sinned and to whom?

3. What are the bad consequences of your sin? Have you treated them or do they still exist?

4. Are there constant causes that lead you to sin? What are they? Are there occasional causes or have they become a habit? What have you done to avoid these causes?

5. Have you tried to repent and forsake these sins? Have you succeeded or failed in repenting?

### **Note:**

These questions are meant to help the beginners in their spiritual lives to examine themselves accurately so their confession may reveal what is inside them.

**However, those who are advanced in their spiritual lives should examine themselves from the positive aspects, which are the virtues they neglect to possess.**

We are all required to be perfect and holy and we all have to grow in the grace and virtue as St. Peter said, "Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." (2 Peter 3:18)

**Therefore, those who are spiritually growing should examine themselves from both aspects: the negative and positive in such a way that these may be an incentive for their continued growth in the holy life with God.**

## **D) A PRAYER BEFORE CONFESSION**

O Holy Father, Who longs to the sinners' return, Who promised to accept those who repent, look at a soul that was long lost in the valleys of disobedience. I have long tasted the bitterness of misery, being away from the source of salvation. Now I come back to You to be purified, accept me and do not reject me, for when You look at me with mercy and compassion, I will be cleansed and saved. But if You turn away from me, I will perish. Grant me, O Lord, Your blessing to strengthen my will to come closer to You in faith and hope, to confess my sins, and detest returning to them. Let Your Holy Spirit remind me not to stray. Enlighten my heart O God, so that I can see the graveness of my sins and negligence and have the will to obey your commandments and live for the glory of Your Holy name. **Amen.**

## **A PRAYER AFTER CONFESSION**

O Father, I am grateful for Your goodness and love for mankind. You did not wish that I perish but awakened me from my sleep and guided me to your way. You saved me from the valley of death to the protection of Your strong fortress. Fill me with hope and faith. I come to You like the sick wishing to be healed, like the hungry seeking to be filled, like the poor to the source of riches, the sinner to the redeemer and like the dying to the origin of life. You are my salvation, my health, my life and my strength. With You, I find consolation, happiness and comfort. Help me, protect me and surround me with Your goodness. Teach me to put my will in Your hands and live according to Your will. Remove my weakness so that I may be firm and honest to You to the end. **Amen.**

# COMMUNION

**"He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood  
abides in Me and I in him."  
(John 6:56)**

## A) HONOR AND WORK OF THIS SACRAMENT

Many are the blessings of the Almighty, abundant is His grace, strong is His might, and deep is His love... Truly what St. Gregory said in his Divine Liturgy, “Holy, Holy, O Lord and Holy in everything, indescribable is the power of Your wisdom, and **no manner of speech can measure the depth of Your love of mankind.**” St. John Chrysostom said, “How many of you say, “I wish to see the appearance, looks and clothes of the Lord.” Here, you see, touch and eat Him. You still desire to see His clothes although He gave you Himself, not only to see, but also to touch, eat, and take inside you!” Meditate then on that great honor, the food that God offers you to enjoy! We eat Him and with Him we unite, He is Who the angels wish to see but do not dare to look at because of His shining glory.”

**All God’s works are full of majesty and glory but the Sacrament of Communion is the greatest of them.** If God has granted us spiritual weapons with which we fight and overcome as the Apostle mentioned in Ephesians 6:11-16, **certainly this sacrament is the strongest of all in strength and effect. It is the extension of the sacrifice of the cross** by which the Son of God redeemed the world and defeated the devil and death. St. Macarius the Great said, “Through this sacrament you are protected against the devil, and if anyone abuses this sacrament, the power of darkness will win over him.”

**Through the Holy Communion, we have the power to overcome the causes of sin, especially inner desires, the devil’s temptations, and lusts of the world. The church calls it “the food of the strong.”** It is written about Jesus, “For power went out from Him and healed them all.” (Luke 6:19)

St. John Chrysostom said, “**We, who are sick, let us partake of this sacrament with faith, for those who touched His garment were healed; what about those who eat Him all.**” He also said, “After eating this spiritual food, let us turn into lions which frighten the devils, inflamed with the fire of love.” St. Ambrose said, “Let the Lord Jesus be your guest, Who will immediately drive the devil away and shut off the doors which lead to temptations.”

**Our weapons get their power from the Divine Grace received from the Blood of Jesus, which in this sacrament.** Using other spiritual weapons, we fight the devil with the power of Jesus, but **in this sacrament, Jesus Himself fights our enemies.** He said, “Whosoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me and I in him.” (John 6:56) St. Paul said, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me.” (Galatians 2:20) The Revelation says, “They overcame him (the devil) by the blood of the Lamb (Christ).” (Revelation 12:11) or as David prophesied, “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.” (Psalm 23:5) This is the holy table, which the Lord prepares for us by which we defeat our spiritual enemies.

**The Holy Communion is food for our spirit and life.** “The Lord has made His wonderful works to be remembered; The Lord is gracious and full of compassion. He has given food to those who fear Him; He will ever be mindful of His covenant.” (Psalm 111:4-5) St. Augustine said, “He who wants to live with You and loves life, let him proceed and eat Your Body.” **As the Israelites were fed with manna in the wilderness until they entered the promised land, so does this Holy Communion feeds our souls and protects us in the world until we enter the heavenly Jerusalem.**

Let us meditate in Jesus' promises as He established this sacrament. "He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood **abides in Me and I in him.**" (John 6:56) How does this abiding in Jesus occur? We do not know. All that we experience are the blessings and effects of that abiding. Jesus said, "**I am the vine and you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned. If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you.**" (John 15:5-7) Therefore, through the Holy Communion, we abide in Jesus and He abides in us and we can say with St. Paul, "Your life is hidden with Christ in God." (Colossians 3:3)

When the Lord descended in the past on the Mount of Sinai with His glory, the mount was blazing with fire and smoke. "And if so much as a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned, or thrust through with an arrow. And so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I am exceedingly afraid and trembling." (Hebrews 12:20-21; Exodus 19:12-13; Deuteronomy 9:19)

O Lord, in the Old Testament, they could not dare touch the mountain upon which You descended with Your glory. In the New Testament, the priest carries You in his hands as the Blessed Virgin Mary carried You in her arms. Moreover, we all eat You to abide in You and to live by You. It is written, "You are a Consuming fire." (Hebrews 12:29) So how does this fire which devours the evil ones change to fire which purifies us from sins, burns all evil planted inside us and inflames our hearts with Your love?

**The blessings of this Holy Sacrament extend not only to this life but also to the life to come.** The Lord Jesus said, "I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood **has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.**" (John 6:51, 54)

St. Irenaeus said, "How can they say the person who eats the Lord's body and drinks His blood will perish and will not have eternal life? Let them then change their opinion or abstain from the Eucharist." St. Cyril the Pillar of faith said, "He gave us His body and blood so that the power of corruption would disappear. He would live in us with the Holy Spirit and we would become partakers of His holiness and be more spiritual than the heavenly creatures." He also said, "Because of Adam's disobedience, our bodies became subject to corruption and death. However, because **Christ is inside us with His body**, we will undoubtedly rise in perfection, for it is impossible that "the Life" does not raise those in whom it is dwelling."

**When you partake of this Holy Sacrament, you receive Christ in your heart. Whenever Jesus enters a place, He blesses, sanctifies, and purifies it.** He entered St. Mary's womb and made her Queen of heaven and earth. He entered Zacharias' house and filled John the Baptist with the Holy Spirit, while he was still in Elizabeth's womb. He entered the manger in Bethlehem and made it a sanctuary and a paradise for the angels and humans. He entered Egypt and broke down its idols. He went into the Jordan River and sanctified its water. He entered Peter's house and cured his mother-in-law. He entered Jairus' house and raised his daughter from the dead. He entered Zacchaeus' house and saved him. He entered the house of Mary and Martha and they became saints.

If people have been able to preserve fruits and vegetables for longer periods without rot, can't the body of Jesus and His blood preserve our life from the corruption of sin?

## **B) HOW DO WE BENEFIT FROM THIS SACRAMENT?**

So far, we discussed some of the blessings of this great sacrament, but we might wonder and ask, “Why do we not feel all these holy blessings whenever we receive the Holy Communion?” The answer is clear. It is because we do not prepare ourselves well enough to receive this great sacrament. We do not spend the time or the effort in this preparation.

Noah had spent a hundred years in building the ark in which he was saved with his family. King Solomon spent seven years in building God’s temple and made a feast to sanctify it which lasted eight days, and offered one thousand sacrifices. However, we do not spend even half an hour to prepare ourselves to receive this great blessing!

**We shall point out to some of the spiritual practices, which help us with the grace of God to enjoy the blessings of Holy Communion.** It is preferable to start these practices the night before communion. These practices are to be followed in addition to examining ourselves and confessing.

### **First: Stir Your Emotions and Prepare Yourself.**

Sit with yourself quietly the night before communion to stir in your heart holy desires and emotions for your beloved Jesus Christ Who offers Himself to you in this Holy Sacrament. The more you prepare yourself, the more you feel God’s comforts and blessings filling your life after the Holy Communion.

When the disciples asked Jesus, “Where do you want us to prepare the Passover?” He asked two of them to go into the city to find **“A large upper room, furnished and prepared.”** (Mark 14:15) Jesus Himself had chosen the place where He ate the Passover with His disciples and established the Sacrament of Eucharist. He had chosen an upper room, furnished and prepared. Let us think about each of these characteristics.

**Jesus established this sacrament in an upper room,** that is, in a place, which is upstairs, referring to elevating ourselves up to heaven. Likewise, in the transfiguration, when Jesus wanted to show His glory to three of His disciples, He took them to a high mountain. (Mark 9:2) Again, anyone who wants to encounter God’s glory has to lift himself upward by meditating. The upper room was furnished and prepared. The Lord wants our hearts to be prepared and decorated with virtues ready to receive Him. It is not enough to clean the streets whenever we want to receive great dignitaries, but we also have to decorate them. It is not enough to clean our hearts from sin and evil, but we also have to decorate them with feelings of love and humility.

Sit with yourself and meditate on how your Savior desires through your participation in this sacrament to prepare a place in your heart so that He may be united with you and help you overcome all your enemies. His desire to unite with us is because of His great love for us. Why does He love us? We do not know. All we know is that He loves us for no reason. He said, “My delight was with the sons of men.” (Proverbs 8:31)

By establishing this great sacrament, God lowered Himself from His glory, and offered Himself as food to satisfy our souls. He said, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, For they shall be filled.” (Matthew 5:6)

As Moses had made the tabernacle with impeccable wood covered with pure gold just to contain the two stone tablets of the commandments, how much more should our souls be free from the vice of sin and be decorated with the gold of divine virtues!

Joseph of Arimathea put the body of our Lord in a new sepulcher where no one had been buried before to honor Him so that the Holy Body would not be in a place where there were decayed dead bodies. Then, how can a Christian accept the Lord in a heart full of hatred, love of the world, or evil lust?

**Never proceed to this holy table while you are not ready; without the garment of the feast.** Jesus raised Jairus’ daughter from death and gave her food to eat. Likewise, after repenting from the death of sin you should eat this heavenly food. The manna that God gave to His people in the wilderness was a symbol of His holy body and precious blood. In the wilderness of this world, we too should eat this spiritual manna. The manna was given to the Israelites after their exodus from Egypt, the land of slavery, and their crossing of the Red Sea. No one deserves to eat this spiritual food unless he has been freed from Pharaoh - that is, the devil - and has crossed the sea of repentance.

## **Second: Meditate on God’s Great Love:**

**Meditate on the great love, which God displays to you in this sacrament.** God did not only create you in His image, send His only Son to save you from the bondage of the devil and restore you to your original image, but He also gave you His body and His blood as food for you, a cure for your spiritual ailments.

Think carefully **“When did God start to love you?”** Did He love you at the same time you started loving Him or when you were yet a child and your angel was always looking at the face of the Father in heaven? He loved you even before that. He loved you before your arrival in this world, even before its creation!

Before you became a son of God, He had been preparing for you all your needs and blessings. “Yes, I have loved you with an everlasting love. Therefore, with lovingkindness have I drawn you.” (Jeremiah 31:3)

The Lord Jesus did not only grant us salvation and redemption, but He also gave us an eternal promise that He would be with us even to the end of the age. (Matthew 28:20) His presence with us is apparent in this sacrament whereby His body is in the midst of His people. His name is “Emmanuel”. It means, “God is with us.”

King Ahasuerus, of Persia, once prepared a great feast that lasted for six months, and invited all the prominent people in his kingdom. That was the talk of the entire world. On the other hand, the Lord Jesus prepared for us, a feast that lasted two thousand years and will continue to the end of

the world. King Ahasuerus offered earthly food to his invited guests, while Jesus Christ offers Himself. No one ever in the history of mankind has fed his children his own flesh.

**The love of the Lord Jesus is very evident if we consider the circumstances in which He established this sacrament.** It was while the people were plotting to kill Him in a horrible way. He was busy showing His love by giving them the Food of Life! As the carpenter was making His cross, the blacksmith preparing the nails which would thrust His flesh and others were gathering the thorns which would pierce His holy head, Christ was preparing for them the Food of Life; His body!

St. John Chrysostom said, “Which shepherd feeds his sheep his body?” We hear of mothers who give their babies to nurses to feed them. Jesus did not want to do that with us; instead, He fed us His blood and united us with Him.

### **Third: Meditate on His Great Humility:**

If you have meditated on God’s love while preparing yourself to partake of the Holy Sacrament, you should then meditate on the most astonishing humility of your Savior. **He did not only reveal His love, but He also revealed it in humility.**

As he was dying, St. Jerome looked at the priest who came to give him the Holy Communion and said, “How great is Your humility, O Lord! You come to a sinner like me to feed me Yourself?” Meditating on the humility of our Lord Jesus creates in us a feeling of unworthiness to have Him in our weak temple. He said, “Learn of Me for I am gentle and lowly in heart.” (Matthew 11:29) As the almighty God humbled Himself for me, should not I humble myself to be worthy of His presence inside me?

**How great is Your humility, O my Master?** Heaven is not pure in Your eyes and You call me, the sinner, to come close to You and be united with You! Who would believe these words had you not said them? When Your mother St. Mary visited Elizabeth, she said in humility, “But why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord come to me?” (Luke 1:43) How should my feelings be when I receive not St. Mary but her Lord Himself, Creator and Savior? The pagan centurion found himself unworthy of having Jesus enter his house to heal his servant. He said, “Lord I am not worthy that You should come under my roof. But only speak a word and my servant will be healed.” (Matthew 8:8)

Let us meditate in what St. Paul said, “For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away to renew them again in repentance” (Hebrews 6:4-5)

### **Fourth: Exercises Before and After Communion:**

The previous exercises should be performed the day before communion. It is preferable that you sleep early that night so that you may wake up early the next morning. If you wake up during

the night, fill your heart with holy words so that you may prepare yourself to receive the heavenly Bridegroom Who watches over you while you are sleeping and offers you precious gifts.

### **1. On The Morning Of the Communion Day:**

Before going to church that morning, examine your mind and remember all the times you strayed from the Lord and sinned against Him since the last time you had communion. Remember how much you have insulted your Lord every time you sinned.

However, Do not lose hope, fill your heart with hope for the great gift you are about to receive. Proceed to the Lord in humility in your heart. He will come into you and rest, not with Moses and Elijah as was in the Transfiguration, but with you revealing His glory so that you may say, "Lord, it is good for us to be here." Try to close the door of your heart to anything except the Lord Jesus.

On your way to the church, struggle hard to keep your mind and heart on the Lord and on the great Sacrament that you are about to receive. Say the psalms that are said as one goes to the house of the Lord. Stir your emotions and heart toward the love of God and His humility as mentioned earlier.

### **2. During the Holy Eucharist:**

**In church, stand in a quiet place.** When communion time approaches, **think deeply and humbly: Who is Jesus Who will abide and unite with you and who are you to receive Him?**

He is the Son of God in Whose presence the heaven and all its hosts tremble. He is the Holy of Holies. In His great love, He made Himself of no reputation taking the form of a servant, although He is God carrying everything by the word of His might.

**Who are you?** You are nothing. You are the worst of all creatures due to your evil and corruption. You are very weak, as the devils laugh at you and trick you. You have insulted your Lord and Creator. Instead of thanking Him for His blessings, you have trodden over His priceless blood shed for you. (Hebrews 10:10)

After all this, He is still calling you to receive this Holy Sacrament because of His great love for you. Moreover, **His great love reaches a stage whereby it obliges you to partake of it**, for He said, "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you" (John 6:53) As He never shuts the door of his mercy; moreover, He never turns His face away from you even if you are enslaved to all evil desires.

### **3. The Sacred Moment:**

After you have warmed up yourself with His love and mercy proceed to the Holy Communion in awe and reverence saying, "My Lord, I am not worthy of receiving You for I have often displeased You by my sins over which I still have not wept. I am not worthy of receiving You, O Lord, for I did not purify myself of all evil. St. Mary bore You because she was full of grace, but I am full of evil, hypocrisy and lust. O my Almighty God, make me worthy to receive you in my heart, for I have come to you in faith."

**At the moment of communion**, when you open your mouth to eat the pure Body, say to the priest, “I have sinned, absolve me father.” Then proceed in complete faith, love and hope to the One Whom you love. Put the handkerchief on your mouth with eagerness and cautiousness as if you want to hide a great treasure, the treasure hidden in a field and the unique pearl of great value which the merchant found. (Matthew 13) You also want to hide this great grace in your heart as David said, “Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You.” (Psalms 119:1)

#### **4. After Communion:**

**In church:** After you received communion and drank water, choose a quiet place in the sanctuary and shut yourself completely to all surroundings. Then pray deeply from your heart saying, “O my King, the almighty in heaven and earth, what made You enter my unworthy heart? I am poor, blind and naked! O great and incomprehensible love! What do you want from me a sinner? Nothing except that I love You and that the fire of Your love be inflamed in my heart, that fire which burns out every unwanted love and unholy desire. Lord; Listen to the promises of my heart. Look at me, and let my desire and will be the same as Yours. As You have given me Yourself, I submit myself completely to You so that I may be in You. I am weak and cannot do that with my own power, but I am confident that You will help me.”

Even after the priest gives the congregation the final benediction to leave, do not leave the church right away to avoid meeting your friends and talking nonsense and useless conversation. Instead, stay behind for a while until everyone has left the church. **Try to spend the day of communion in quietness and make good use of the grace you received.** Try to store inside you spiritual riches so that you may benefit from this great sacrament.

For example, we do not advise students and employees to have communion before going to work unless it is urgent for them to do so, because the nature of their work does not provide the desired quietness. It is the wisdom of the church to prohibit some physical practices such as spitting, or taking anything out of the mouth on the communion day so that her children may remember the grace they have received for a longer period of time and may lift their thoughts to heavenly matters.

**At Home:** Return home directly, and if possible, try not to get busy doing any physical or worldly work. We exclude studying for the students and spiritual ministry. Do not hurry to eat, but rather keep alone and pray to God to preserve your life and to help you start a new one, free from disdain, abasement, and shame.

**Try to spend your day in quietness** and be careful of even the simplest annoyances that you may encounter, for the devil always wants to trick you and tempt you. He is like a snake awaiting the hatching of an egg to snatch it. He is watching you since the time you had this great blessing and armed yourself with this strong and mighty weapon. Struggle to increase your faith in that great sacrament so that it may make you more blessed and holy. “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” (John 20:29)

St. Basil the Great describes the responsibility of the one who takes communion, based on St. Paul's words, saying: “For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the

Lord's death till He comes." (1 Corinthians 11:26) This death suffered by the Son of God for all the people including the partakers of the Holy Communion means that they should live not for themselves but for the One Who died and rose for them. (2 Corinthians 5:15)

Therefore, all those who proceed to take communion must be ready to be faithful to God's commandments, not live for the world, but for the One Who they have received inside them. Never be like the people of Jerusalem who accepted Jesus joyfully on Palm Sunday singing, "Blessed is He Who comes in the name of the Lord," and then rejected Him a few days later. In the morning, they spread their garments in front of Him, and in the evening, they plotted to take His clothes off. Be faithful in your love to Him and be loyal to Him; ask Him to keep you steadfast in the road of grace and to keep your garment pure.

## C) WHAT IS COMMUNION?

"What is Communion, what is the objective of Communion?"

### 1. Communion is a Covenant:

**Communion is a holy covenant between God and His people. Through it, God becomes their Lord and they become His children.** "This cup is the new covenant in My Blood which is shed for you." (Luke 22:20) St. Paul also said, "Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a **new covenant** with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah - not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because **they did not continue in My covenant**, and I disregarded them, said the LORD. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My laws into their mind and write them on their hearts and I will be their God, and they shall be Me people. **For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more.**" (Hebrews 8:8-12) This covenant implies privileges as well as duties and responsibilities.

The first covenant, which God made was with the Israelites, when He took them out of the land of Egypt, was by the "Passover Lamb". It was a symbol of "Jesus the Lamb of God" in the new covenant that He was going to constitute by the sacrifice on cross. As we know, the Holy Communion is an extension to the sacrifice of the holy cross.

### 2. Communion Means Membership in the Church:

It is our membership in the holy church; that is, we are all members in the Body of Christ, which is the church. (Ephesians 1:23) St. Paul said, The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we, being many are one bread and body, for we are all partakers of that one bread." (1 Corinthians 10: 16-17) **Therefore, the believers take the Holy Communion so that they may have a covenant with one another and be united as members in the one flesh.** "And if one

member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.” (1 Corinthians 12:26) St. Basil’s Liturgy says, “Make us worthy, O Lord, to partake of this Holy Sacrament and purify our souls, bodies and spirits so that we may be **one body and one spirit.**”

### **3. Communion is a Spiritual Grace for Righteousness:**

**It is a great spiritual grace, which grants us the gift of life, of abiding in Christ and of growth, which supersedes all other spiritual means.** We mentioned this point earlier. The priest prays in the sanctification part of the liturgy saying, “He decreed this **great sacrament for our righteousness**” The priest also prays secretly in St. Basil’s Liturgy after the fraction saying, “We ask and entreat Your goodness, O lover of mankind, that You may purify us so that we may partake of this Holy Sacrament to be filled with Your Holy Spirit, abiding in Your right faith, to be filled with Your true love and to speak of Your glory all the time.”

## **D) GENERAL TOPICS ABOUT COMMUNION**

### **1. Partaking Regularly of the Holy Communion:**

Partaking of the Holy Communion has a great honor, blessing and effect on our lives unequalled by all other spiritual means. We should be regular in receiving this Holy Sacrament.

Nothing prevents you from receiving this gift; the holy table is close to you. Many abstain from taking communion either because they are afraid of it or because they neglect the salvation of their souls. We shall discuss these two points.

It is necessary for the believers to partake of this great sacrament regularly. We are asked for nothing more than spiritual preparation and we should always be prepared. **In early ages, that was what all the Christians did.** They used to partake of the Holy Communion every Sunday. The Book of Acts says about the Christians of the early church, “They continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayer.” (Acts 2:42) By being regular in receiving the Holy Communion, we feel our attachment to God and live a pleasing life to Him. This is known from the canons set by the Apostles and the church fathers. St. Eustinas the martyr said, “The holy Body was carried by the priests to those who could not attend the church because of difficult circumstances.”

**Hence, we should partake of the communion regularly every week, once every two weeks, or at least once a month.**

**One might say that receiving the Holy Communion frequently will lead to lessening our reverence and honor of the sacrament and will weaken its moving effect on the soul.**

To answer that we say that the spiritual preparation that precedes communion and the spiritual secret effect of communion will awaken our spiritual awareness. If this theory is true, we

should stop praying for a while not to lose the feeling of reverence. The opposite is true. The more we pray, the more our hearts are inflamed with the holy love for God. The Bible asks us to pray all the time; “Men always ought to pray.” (Luke 18:1) and “Pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17)

## **2. Partaking of the Communion on Certain Occasions**

Some Christians do not receive the Holy Communion except on special occasions they set for themselves such as Holy Thursday or Saturday before Easter. It is good to receive the Holy Communion on such occasions. Yet, we should take communion at regular close intervals so that we may keep the holy covenant with our Lord.

Another group of Christians; students for example, take communion before their exams, so that God may help them. Others receive communion on their birthdays. There is nothing wrong in seeking God in times of difficulty for He said, “Call Me in trouble and I will save you so that you may glorify Me.” It is also good to remember your Creator on your birthday so that you may have a good start for your new year. Yet, **true penance and thorough confession should precede communion so that our sins would not block God’s mercy when we make that material request.**

**There is a tradition in our church for the two fiancés to receive the Holy Communion before the Sacrament of matrimony.** The main point is that no one should proceed to have the Holy Communion without true repentance and complete confession. Hence, if the two persons do so, they will overcome all the marital problems that may lead to separation or divorce. There is nothing wrong in this tradition; yet, if it is done in a superficial way without repentance and confession, then it is not beneficial.

Besides, if one of the fiancés confessed-certain problems just a day before marriage, there will neither be neither enough time nor the opportunity to overcome them. If one of the fiancés is confessing for the first time, we cannot expect a complete and open confession in this case. We recommend that the fiancés practice the Sacrament of Confession from the beginning of their relation if they are not already doing so.

## **3. Meaning of “Worthy to Partake of Communion”**

Many refrain from partaking of the communion although they have the desire. That is because of their fear of the sacrament or because they do not understand what it means to be ready to partake of the Holy Sacrament. The words of the priest in St. Basil’s Liturgy may scare them; “O Lord, make us worthy to partake of Your holies in purification for our souls, bodies and spirits.”, “Holy to the holies.” and the words of the deacon right before communion, “Pray for the worthy communion of the immaculate, heavenly, and holy mysteries.” What is the state of being worthy of the communion?

Is it that you proceed when you have no sin and your life is free from all evil? One of the basic principles of the Christian faith is that being righteous is due to the divine grace, not due to one’s own struggle. St. Paul says, “If righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in

vain.” (Galatians 2:21) If we wait to become righteous before we proceed for the communion, this means that we want to become righteous by our own efforts.

On the contrary, we should proceed with all our weaknesses and imperfections so that God would make us righteous like the prodigal son. He went to his father with his dirty, worn-out clothes, and his father was the one who put on him the new robe, shoes on his feet and a ring on his finger. In short, our life will not be complete unless we are united with God.

**The right preparation for communion is true repentance from the heart over all our past sins and a hearty determination to submit all our life to God, to live with Him in holiness and righteousness, and to get rid of all our weaknesses which hinder our relationship with God.**

**To be worthy to partake of the communion means to proceed in awe, reverence, and appreciation of that great sacrament with the feeling that we are not worthy of that great honor.** Therefore, the Christian proceeds as a sick person who needs the medicine to cure all his diseases.

St. John Chrysostom comments on what the priest says in the liturgy, “Holy to the holies,” by the answer all the people give, “We are not holy, but we are sinners not worthy of that name. The only Holy and the Holy of holies is Jesus Christ Who was crucified for our salvation. Thus, the people respond by saying, “One is the Holy Father, One is the Holy Son, One is the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

When the deacon says, “Pray for the worthy communion of the immaculate, heavenly, and holy mysteries” he warns those who dare to proceed for communion carelessly and without fear. As St. Paul said, “He who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgement to himself, **not discerning the Lord's body.**” (1 Corinthians 11:29)

He also said, “Let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread and drink of that cup” (1 Corinthians 11:28) It is most important to examine ourselves and see if we made an honest confession. St. John Chrysostom says, “Let no one proceed to the Holy Communion with laziness or negligence, but let all go to receive it with enthusiasm and preparation so that we may not be punished. Do not be guilty of His body and blood as those who crucified Him.”

Sometimes, after we determine to lead a holy life with God, we revert to sinning, not deliberately or carelessly, but owing to our weak nature. **Do not be alarmed** and lose hope. St. John said, “My little children, these things I write to you, that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the righteous. And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the whole world.” (1 John 2:1-2)

**4. *\*\*section removed from this version\*\****

## 5. The Priest and the Sacrament

The devil puts doubts in the minds of some believers to prevent them from the blessings of this Holy Sacrament. Some people refrain from taking communion with the excuse that the priest is a bad person or has many faults and therefore they doubt the holiness of this sacrament. Moreover, they do not go to another priest, in whose righteousness they feel confident, but rather restrain from communion because they have doubts about all priests.

Obviously, this is a trick of the devil to deprive those people of the blessings of this great sacrament.

The question is: **“Is there a relation between the holiness of the priest and the fulfillment of this sacrament? Does the changing of the bread and wine into the holy Body and Blood of Jesus Christ not happen except when a holy priest prays?”**

Of course, the priest should be a righteous person full of faith, worthy of this great service. However, the wholesomeness of the sacraments does not depend on the faith or righteousness of the priest administering them. In other words, **the power of the sacrament and the grace it grants do not depend on the worthiness of the priest. It only depends on the worthiness and the will of our Savior Jesus Christ Who is granting this grace.** Jesus said in the “Last Supper”, “This is My body, this is My blood”, by His power, it is always the same. He said in the past, “Let there be light,” and it was, and still exists and will remain until the end of the world. Thus the seven sacraments of the church, including communion, do not depend on the righteousness of the priest but on the work of the Holy Spirit, on Whom the priest calls.

Therefore, the priests are only visible instruments by whom the Lord fulfills His sacraments to reach His believers in an invisible way. Again, if the faith of the priest and his holiness were essential matters for the sacraments to be real, this would cause many doubts in the church and would hamper reaping the fruits of the Holy Sacraments. The people will always be in doubt about the righteousness of the priests, only God the examiner of the hearts knows. Moreover, the priest may be holy today and evil tomorrow, like all the other human beings.

St. Gregory the Theologian said regarding Baptism, “I have two seals: one made of gold and the other of iron, each bearing the same royal picture. Each one makes a print on wax. Is the print made by one seal distinguishable from that made by the other seal? Nothing makes it distinguishable. If you think yourself extremely clever, tell me which is the picture printed by the golden seal and which by the iron one and why both pictures look alike. Similarly, look upon each of the priests who baptize you, one might be more spiritual than the other, but the power of baptism is the same.”

John the Baptist’s testimony about Jesus was, “This is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.” (John 1:33) We compare this with what St. John wrote in his gospel, “Jesus Himself did not baptize but His disciples.” (John 4:2) This means, if Peter baptizes, then Jesus Himself would be baptizing. If Paul baptizes, it is still Jesus Who is baptizing. If Judas baptizes, it is still Jesus Who is baptizing. The given power does not differ from one minister to the other; John the Baptist said, “He (Jesus) is the one Who baptizes.”

St. Paul also wrote, “So then neither he who plants anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase.” (1 Corinthians 3:7) The power and effect of the sacrament are due to Jesus and not to the priest who only administers it.

Again, St. Augustine wrote in his third book, “It makes no difference as to who administers the sacraments, a righteous person or a sinner; this is like the seeds in the hand of the farmer. Whether his hands are clean or dirty, the seeds will bring forth fruit.”

We conclude that the priests are mere instruments in the hand of God Who sanctifies this sacrament and all other sacraments by the power of the Holy Spirit. We should proceed with praise and confidence thanking God for His love, mercy and compassion, having prepared “this great sacrament for our righteousness.”

## **6. Communion and Fasting**

The person partaking of the Holy Communion should be fasting with the church in its fasts. The healthy person should fast with the church in joy, love and eagerness without giving excuses not to fast. He should feel that fasting is a blessing to his life.

The church has put in its consideration whose circumstances prevent them from fasting such as pregnant or nursing mothers, the sick and the old. The spiritual father will advise them, to fast or not. The length of the fast and the way of fasting are according to the physical and spiritual circumstance of each person.

**Period of Abstinence:** The period of abstinence is the period before communion in which the person refrains from eating and drinking. It is known that this period is nine hours that start from midnight of the day of communion except in other special circumstances. After communion, one should be careful not to take anything out of his mouth the rest of the communion day.

## **7. Communion and the Orthodox Belief**

Is it allowed for non-Orthodox believers to partake of the Holy Communion in the Orthodox churches? It is definitely not allowed. The truth cannot be divided or compromised.

Another question: Is it allowed for the Orthodox believers, including the immigrants, or those in countries which have no Orthodox churches, to partake of communion in non-Orthodox churches? The answer is no. It is the church's responsibility to extend the service to those people wherever they are. The laws of the church prevent its children from attending meetings which the church considers heretic.

**A final point, the communion partaker should attend the Matins absolution, the absolution of the ministers and must attend the Gospel reading.** It is not allowed for the person who comes to the church after the Gospel reading to partake of the Holy Communion. Early attendance of the church has special blessings as the Psalmist says, "GOD, You are my God; Early will I seek You; My flesh longs for You in a dry and thirsty land Where there is no water." (Psalm 63:1) Also Solomon said, "Those who seek me diligently will find me." (Proverbs 8:17) Let us say with the church, "My eyes have awakened before the morning watch that I may meditate on Your sayings."

## **E) PRAYER BEFORE COMMUNION**

Lord, I am not worthy that You enter under my roof for I am a sinner. Just say a word and my soul will be healed. Tell me, "Your sins are forgiven." I am empty of all righteousness. I am depending completely on Your abundant compassion, Your mercy and love to mankind. You humbled Yourself from Your unlimited glory, and accepted to be born in a manger. So please my holy Savior, do not refuse to come to my poor soul who is eagerly awaiting Your presence. You did not refuse to enter the leper's house to heal him, so please come into my soul to purify it. You did not forbid the sinful woman to kiss Your feet so please do not deprive me from coming near You to partake of Your holy body and Your precious blood. May this Holy Communion banish my impurities and mortify all my evil desires. Help me O Lord to keep Your commandments, for the purification of my soul and body from every sin and for the acceptance of Your gifts and blessings. Let Your Spirit abide in me and unite me with You so that I may live for the glory of Your holy name. Amen.

## **PRAYER AFTER COMMUNION**

My heart is filled with joy and my tongue with rejoicing. My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God, my Savior. I have come to You, O Lord, so You may clothe me with purity that I may be worthy of Your joy. Let my union with You today be everlasting for it makes me grow in virtue and strengthens my faith and my hope. Let this communion be a symbol of my salvation, a robe for my new birth and for the purity of love. Let it be an everlasting joy for my soul and an answer to my prayers before Your fearful altar.

I yield myself to Your arms. Let me be one with You. Direct me according to Your will. Awaken my heart and conscience. Fight the devil for me. Tell the storm to stop. Walk with me. Quench my thirst. Inflammate the fire of Your love in my heart. Overcome all my weaknesses. Abide with me for the day is far spent, for You are my goal and my happiness, only You, Lord. Amen.

# **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 the entire 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 the entire 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 the entire 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 re-own 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 brings 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, 6:13, 16)]. 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 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 asks 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 lying 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 studies 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, led 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 newspaper, 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 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, weekends 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 the raising of incense on Saturday evenings and Sunday mornings and in the Holy Eucharist** 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.