

Selections from the Book
PARADISE
OF
THE SPIRIT

By
His Grace Bishop Youanis
Late Bishop of the Province of Gharbia,
Tanta, Egypt

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	page
How?	3
Worshipping men	5
1. Prayer	8
A) Prayer: its superiority and power	9
B) Our need to pray	12
C) Conditions of acceptable prayer	21
D) Secret of answered prayer	28
E) Encouragements for prayer.	35
F) Delay in answering prayer	40
G) How do we pray?	42
H) Some problems with prayer.	51
I) The ceaseless prayer	57
J) Praying according to rules	60
2. Fasting	64
A) Spiritual understanding of fasting.	65
B) Significance of fasting for spiritual life	67
C) Why do I fast?	71
D) How do I fast?	74
E) Advice and guidelines	81
F) Fasts of the Coptic Church	83
3. Almsgiving	85
A) A general word about giving.	86
B) God's commands about giving	100
C) How do we present our offerings?	104
D) Tithes	109
E) Some objections against giving	115
F) Examples of generous givers	116

These chapters are selected from book 2 of the series of three books entitled *Paradise of the Spirit*,
by Bishop Youanis.

HOW?

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

(Mark 12:41-44)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

to "put in all that she had, her whole livelihood" (Mark 12:41).

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

God will ask you also how was your heart, was it inflamed for the sake of glorifying His name and the coming of His kingdom, and not how long did you spend in serving him. Did you serve "with eye service, as men-pleasers, or as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart" (Ephesians 6:6).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

WORSHIPPING MEN

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

REVIEW TO SOME OF YOUR ACTIVITIES:

Your Prayers:

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

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

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

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

Your Almsgiving:

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

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

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

Your Service:

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

FEATURES OF WORSHIPPING MEN IN THE SERVICE:

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

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

BLESSINGS OF FLEEING FROM WORSHIPPING MEN:

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

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

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

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

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

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

PRAYER

Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you" (Matthew 7:7)

- A) Prayer: its superiority and power**
- B) Our need to pray**
- C) Conditions of acceptable prayer**
- D) Secret of answered prayer**
- E) Encouragement for prayer**
- F) Delay in answering prayer**
- G) How do we pray?**
- H) Some problems with prayer**
- I) The unceasing prayer**
- J) Praying according to rule**

A) PRAYER: ITS SUPERIORITY AND POWER

WHAT IS PRAYER?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

SUPERIORITY OF PRAYER:

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

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

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

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

SOME SAYINGS OF THE FATHERS REGARDING ITS SUPERIORITY

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

He also said "**There is nothing stronger than prayer. There is nothing which is equivalent to it.** A man goes to speak with the king in a private matter in the presence of all the members of the army, officers and leaders of different high ranks. They all look at him with respect and regard. This is what happens to those who pray. Imagine a person who comes in with courage and determination in the presence of angels, the Seraphim, the Cherubim, and all the unseen hosts, and approaches the King of all these forces and speaks with Him. What an honor!!".

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

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

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

B) OUR NEED TO PRAY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1. IT IS THE SECRET OF OUR VICTORY:

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

In His eternal plan, what God intended to offer to the souls, He planned to offer through their prayers "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you" (Matthew 7:7). **This is like the ladder which Jacob saw in his dream which was set up on the earth, and its top reached to heaven;** and there the angels of God were ascending and descending it (Genesis 28:12). That is in order to present our requests to God, and to bring back His blessings to us.

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

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

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

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

There are many sayings by the saintly fathers in this regard. St. Augustine says "None of the elected can gain his own salvation without God's help, and nobody deserves this help except by prayer". St. John of the Ladder who is known for his virtues says "The secret of continuous grace

and virtue is continuous prayer. **He who leans on the stick of prayer, his feet do not slip. Even if his feet slip he does not completely fall, because prayer is a help to him who walks in the road of piety".**

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

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

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

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

2. A MEANS FOR RECEIVING BLESSINGS:

In the forefront of the blessings of prayer are the Gifts of the Holy Spirit, whether in consecrating the sacraments in the church or in our own lives. The Lord Jesus said "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Heavenly Father **give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!**" (Luke 11:13). When the disciples prayed after they were threatened by the high priests because they healed the lame man "the place where they were assembled together was shaken; **and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit,** and they spoke the word of God with boldness" (Acts 4:31).

Truly, there is a strong relation between the Holy Spirit and prayer. The Holy Spirit is the "Spirit of Prayer". It was called that in (Zechariah 12:10) "And I will pour on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem **the Spirit of grace and supplication;** then they will look on Me ...". Also in the Epistles of St. Paul, twice it was mentioned in relation to prayer "you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, "Abba, Father"" (Romans 8:15), and "God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, "Abba, Father!"" (Galatians 4:6). The Lord Jesus used the same words "Abba, Father!" in His farewell prayer in Gethsemane (Mark 14:36).

In the two previous verses of St. Paul we read the word "cry out" in one verse and the word "crying out" in the other verse. That is, it is the Holy Spirit Himself who cries out, which without

doubt, shows the amount of help which God gives to man in prayer!!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3. THE LORD JESUS AS AN EXAMPLE:

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

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

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

4. THE APOSTLES THEMSELVES AS EXAMPLES:

The Apostles - Disciples of the Lord - Leaders of the First Church, made prayer number one in their lives. When they wanted to choose a disciple to replace Judas the betrayer, they prayed and the lot fell on Matthias (Acts 1:24-26). **After the descent of the Holy Spirit upon them on the day of Pentecost**, the writer of the book of Acts describes them as continuing steadfastly in prayer (Acts 2:42). **After the event of healing the person who was lame from birth**, and the threats of the high priest family to them, they assembled together and "they raised their voice to God with one accord ... " (Acts 4:24), "And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness" (Acts 4:31).

When their responsibilities increased, and they thought of appointing seven deacons to help them, their logic was: "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; **but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word"** (Acts 6:2-4).

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

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

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

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

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

Damascus; "he is praying" (Acts 9:11).

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

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

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

POWER OF PRAYER

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Father in My name He will give you" (John 16:23).

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

C) CONDITIONS OF ACCEPTABLE PRAYER

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

1. FROM A PURE HEART:

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

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

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

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

2. ACCORDING TO THE WILL OF GOD:

John the beloved of the Lord Jesus said **"If we ask anything according to His will, He hears us"** (1 John 5:14). That is, everything we ask should be according to His perfect love and wisdom. God Who commands us to ask and Who promises us that he answers, does not forsake His wisdom because of our ignorance, in case we ask something which is not useful for us for example!! "For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought" (Romans 8:26). It happens sometimes that we ask and

pray with urgency and fervour for something, as the matter appears clear in our eyes and we seem justified in asking for it, but God does not answer us. Yet later on, we find that it was better that God denied us such requests.

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

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

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

3. IN THE NAME OF THE LORD JESUS:

In His last speech in the Upper Room, the Lord Jesus - as recorded by St. John the Evangelist - commanded His Disciples, time and again, in remarkable repetition, to always in their prayers ask "in His name", and this is how their prayers are answered. Five times, the Lord requested His disciples to present their prayers in His name:

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

Not only the asking is presented in "His Blessed Name", but the answer of the request also, is given in the power of His Holy Name. We notice that the Lord Jesus said to His Disciples "**In that day**" (John 16:23). This phrase related to His previous speech (John 16:7-16), in which He spoke about His promise of sending the Holy Spirit and about the Spirit's work. Thus when Jesus said "**In**

that day", He meant the time when the Holy Spirit would have descended on the believers, and not before "that day", because without the Spirit of God we can do nothing. In the beginning, everything was waiting for the day of Pentecost, and now also everything depends on the work of the Holy Spirit in us. Everything depends on the Holy Spirit. Without the Holy Spirit, we do not even have the strength to confess His Lordship "No one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:3).

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

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

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

4. IN COMPLETE OBEDIENCE:

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

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

We often ask: why do we not receive what we ask for in prayer? Why do we not say with the Apostle "Whatever we ask we receive from Him"? The reason is not that John was an

Apostle and we are mere ordinary believers, but that John was able to keep God's commandment and do what pleases Him. Can we do likewise? The Lord Jesus said "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work" (John 4:34). How beautiful are the words which the Divine Revelation uttered on the tongue of Apostle Paul about the Lord Jesus "Then I said, Behold, I have come - in the volume of the book it is written of Me - to do Your will, O God" (Hebrews 10:7).

5. WITH COMPLETE FAITH:

Apostle James said "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. **But let him ask in faith, with no doubting,** for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord" (James 1:5-7). These words of the Apostle are practical explanation to the words of the Lord "For assuredly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, "Be removed and be cast into the sea", and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will come to pass, he will have whatever he says. Therefore I say to you, **whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them**" (Mark 11:23, 24).

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

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

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

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

St. John of the Ladder says "Faith is the wing of prayer. Without it prayer returns back to the person's bosom". John Cassian said "He is absolutely sure that his prayer is not

answered!! Who is this miserable person? He is who prays and does not believe that he will receive an answer".

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

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

6. WITH THANKSGIVINGS:

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

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

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

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

How little we thank God for His countless goodness, and how much we thank each other for services we do one to the other. With different methods and ways we express our thanks and gratitude

to people. At the same time we appear ungrateful and unappreciative to the Lord Who fills us from His blessings. It is good to thank our brethren, and even better to thank the First and the Greater Giver.

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

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

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

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

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

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

All capable men of prayer, in both the Holy Bible and in Church history, were men who gave themselves to thanksgiving and to giving glory God. **Among them is David the Great whose Psalms overflow with the spirit of thanksgivings to God...** "Bless the Lord, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless His holy name!" (Psalm 103:1), "I will sing of the mercies of the Lord forever; with my mouth will I make known Your faithfulness to all generations" (Psalm 89:1), "I will extol You, my God, O King; and I will bless Your name forever and ever. Every day I will bless You, and I will praise Your name forever and ever" (Psalm 145:1, 2).

7. WITH FORGIVENESS:

In the model prayer which the Lord gave to His Disciples, He explained that it is not permitted for us to ask forgiveness of our trespasses from God, without asking Him at the same time to

forgive us in the same way and same degree by which we forgive those who trespassed against us. In the "Sermon on the Mount" He taught us to pray like that "And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" (Matthew 6:12).

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

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

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

D) SECRET OF ANSWERED PRAYER

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

1. HUMILITY:

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

(A) CONTRITION:

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

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

Ahab was an evil king as the Bible depicts him "But there was no one like Ahab who sold himself to do wickedness in the sight of the Lord" (1 Kings 21:25). Yet as soon as he heard the words of the Prophet Elijah concerning what will happen to him and his household from disasters "he tore his clothes and put sackcloth on his body, and fasted and lay in sackcloth, and went about mourning" (1 Kings 21:27). Then the Lord told Elijah "See how Ahab has humbled himself before Me? Because he

has humbled himself before Me, I will not bring the calamity in his days; but in the days of his son... " (1 Kings 21:29). Hence we see the result of contrition and humility in prayer.

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

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

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

(B) FASTING:

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

(C) WORSHIP (PROSTRATION)

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

every knee bows of things in heaven and things on earth and things under the earth. Unto whom every man is subjected and is in bond of servitude, bowed to the sceptre of Your Kingdom".

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(D) TEARS:

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

David the man of prayer experienced the tears and knew their power, as he often spoke about the tears in the psalms ... "I am weary with my groaning; all night I make my bed swim; I drench my couch with my tears" (Psalm 6:6), "The Lord has heard the voice of my weeping" (Psalm 6:8), "Hear my prayer, O Lord, and give ear to my cry; do not be silent at my tears" (Psalm 39:12), "Because zeal for Your house has eaten me up, and the reproaches of those who reproach You have fallen on me. When I wept and chastened my soul with fasting, ... I also made sackcloth my garment; I became a byword to them" (Psalm 69:9-11). No wonder that David knew the power of the tears and how he used them. We hear him in another psalm saying **"Put my tears into Your bottle; Are they not in Your book?"** (Psalm 56:8).

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

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

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

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

However, we should beware of pride in this case. The saint Anba Oghreese says "If you have a fountain of tears in your prayer, beware not to become proud in your heart as if you were better than the rest of the people. Tears are help which you took from God so that you can actively confess your sins in front of Him, and through them, your heart convinces you that they are forgiven. Do not

exchange the help you took by pains (sins), else you anger He Who gave you this gift". **How much did the saints say about tears, from their own personal experiences.**

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

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

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

2. PERSISTENCE AND PERSEVERANCE:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

St. Augustine comments on the parable of the unjust judge and says "The Lord Jesus Who is with us, would not urge us in this way unless he is willing to give. He is willing to give more than we are ready to take. If the Lord Jesus is not willing to give He would not have said this parable about persistence and showed its importance. What encourages us to pray more than the parable of the unjust judge? This unjust judge did not fear God nor regard man, and in spite of that listened to a widow who pleaded with him and he was overcome because of her persistence not because of his compassion! If he who does not want to be asked listened to her pleading, how much God who urges us to ask, listens to us!!".

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

St. Basil the Great said "If your request is according to the will and the pleasure of God, do not stop asking until you get it. In order to attract our attention to that, the Lord Himself told us the parable of the man who got bread at midnight from his friend by persistence. He said that we ought not

lose heart in our prayer (Luke 18:1) even for many years, and even when our request seems impossible in the eyes of all men, because the things which are impossible with men are possible with God (Luke 18:27)".

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

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

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

E) ENCOURAGEMENT FOR PRAYER

1. QUIETNESS

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

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

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

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

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

John Cassian said "Before every thing we have to carefully observe the principles of the Bible which guide us to proper prayer: we enter our room, close the door and pray. But how do we realize that matter practically? Is it not by isolating the worldly thoughts and the vain concerns and enter into a close fellowship with the Lord? **And what is the meaning of the closed door in prayer? Is it not**

stillness, the complete holy quietness, and the humble closed worshipping lips in front of Him Who tests the hearts?!" (Psalm 7:9).

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

2. SPIRITUAL READINGS:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

+ **"If conscience is engaged in reading and prayer with piety, evil thoughts are not**

planted and one avoids all the traps of the devils".

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

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

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

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

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

3. TOIL AND STRIVING:

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

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

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

The sayings of those saints clearly picture for us the nature of prayer and the necessity for continuous striving. As prayer has many blessings, it requires striving. The road of worship is hard and difficult, described by Christ as narrow is its gate and difficult is its way!! (Matthew 7:14). This fact is stressed by the saying of St. Paul **"For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. ... Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints"** (Ephesians 6:12, 18).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

F) DELAY IN ANSWERING PRAYER

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

G) HOW DO WE PRAY?

1. BODY POSTURE AND PRAYER:

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

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

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

+ "Know dear brothers that God - in all what is done for His sake - desires that we appear well dressed and show respect, modesty and care, not only for His own sake but also for our benefit. Such matters neither benefit nor harm Him, but are for our good".

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Also the eyes lifted up to God in prayer - even closed - have their relevance and effect. Prophet David says "Unto You I lift up my eyes, O You who dwell in the heavens" (Psalm 123:1). Lifting up the eyes of one's soul follows lifting up of one's eyes also "To You, O Lord, I lift up my

soul" (Psalm 25:1). The eyes of the soul are lifted up to God when they stop looking to the earthly matters or material things, and start to despise man-made objects, and think in God alone. The eyes lifted up to God never fail "Turn your eyes away from me, for they have overcome me" (Song 6:5).

2. PREPARING FOR PRAYER:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3. CONTROLLING THE THOUGHTS DURING PRAYER:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4. WANDERING OF THOUGHTS DURING PRAYER:

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

We do not forget to state that it is common for a person attached to certain desires to have a stray mind. Also he who weighs his stomach with plenty of food, his mind may not be able in this state to control and direct his thoughts. The Lord Jesus pointed out to this by saying "But take heed to yourselves, **lest your hearts be weighed down** with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life" (Luke 21:34). **St. Isaac said "Let not your stomach be weighed down lest your mind will be wandering,** and you will be totally distracted when you stand to pray. Your joints will relax and you will be full of laziness and slackness. Not only that, but also your soul will darken and your movements will be mixed up and you will not be able to gather the words because of the darkness. You will have bad taste in everything and will not enjoy the words of the psalms".

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

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

concede to them and resist them. We are condemned if we go along with them and give them place in us".

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

thoughts remembering the marvels from the readings".

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

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

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

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

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

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

5. HEAT OF PRAYER:

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

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

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

6. TALKING PRAYER:

Let your prayer be a normal talk with God without formalities, a talk of a son with to his Heavenly Father, or a talk of a lover to his beloved, even to his worshipped!! St. Augustine says "In the beginning of our prayer we say "Our Father Who art in heaven ...", and by this call, love moves in our hearts - as there is no dearer to the father than the sons - and in us also moves a begging inclination, a trust from our behalf to receive what we shall ask for, since we already - before we asked for anything - received such a great gift; it is granted to us to call God our Father. What is it which He will not give to His children when they ask, since He already granted them the grace of sonship!!".

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

7. ELEMENTS OF PRAYER:

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

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

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

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

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

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

H) SOME PROBLEMS WITH PRAYER

1. LUKEWARMNESS OF PRAYER

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

The cause is either from the self or from the devil. The former cause could be related to certain desires, or from certain psychological or physical states such as fatigue, poor health or lack of physical activities which result in dullness of the mind. Obviously, this soul does not find comfort in prayer. **The second cause** are the attacks which the devil wages, such as boredom, restlessness and wandering of the thought which impede the comforts in prayer. Though, sometimes, God stops His comforts from coming to us for some wisdom He sees for our good and our spiritual benefit, or to test our love and faithfulness to him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Other psalms expressed the suffering from spiritual dryness. Among them are psalms 10,

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

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

2. THE PROBLEM OF TIME:

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

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

When the Church assigned the law of the seven prayers "Prayers of the Agbia", she did not do that for the monks only, but for all believers. The role of the monks is for continuous prayer. The seven daily prayers were mentioned among the laws of the Ecumenical Council of Nicea in the year 325 A.D. Yet these laws go back to the time of the Disciples and were reported among their canons. They were also among the laws of Hipoletis in the beginning of the third century.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Someone to whom God gave some spare time at noon and he was able to say the complete "Sext prayer", should thank God from his heart for this co-ordination and should complete his prayer by the help of God. If he does not find time, except few minutes, and he says the absolution of the prayer or its parts, that is enough. If he does not find even few minutes, let him say one out of the six parts of this prayer "O thou who on the sixth day at the sixth hour ...", for example. What is important is that he did not let this holy chance to go without praying and receiving its blessings. If he does not find even one minute, except few seconds, let him say "Take away the handwriting of our sins O

Christ, as You did on the Cross on the sixth hour". Can we say about this person that he did not remember the Lord in the sixth hour? No, but he remembered Him according to his ability. We say the same about prayers of the other hours.

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

3. THE PROBLEM OF SPACE:

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

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

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

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

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

4. THE PROBLEM OF SHYNESS:

Shyness may form a problem for some people, not only in public prayers but also in their private prayers. They are very embarrassed not only from praying in front of others or in their presence, but also from just knowing that others - who share the dwelling with them - know that they

pray, even members of the same family!! This mere knowledge is a cause of unease and discomfort for them. This problem follows them in the private and general prayer meetings. For such a person who suffers from this shyness, he should gradually train himself not to be shy, by focusing his energy towards God and not the people. Let him have a special petition in his prayer for this problem of shyness.

5. THE SUBJECT OF PRAYING IN SECRET:

Prayer in secret is a command from the Lord Jesus to all believers (Matthew 6:6). But some people understand this command in a crooked way far away from its meaning. **When the Lord Jesus commanded us to pray in secret, He did not mean that nobody sees us or that nobody at all knows that we pray. But He meant elimination of hypocrisy, love of appearance and asking glory from the people.** These diseases filled the society at that time, and the Lord Jesus - not only concerning prayer - commanded us in all we do, we do from the heart to Him and He alone will reward each person according to his deeds. If Christ has meant that nobody at all should see us (praying), how can we explain His saying "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16)?!

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

6. FAMILY OBSTRUCTIONS:

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

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

I) THE CEASELESS PRAYER

Not only those who live the life of quietness in the deserts and the wilderness are qualified for high levels of prayer, but even those who are living among the different endeavours of life, if they make use of every opportunity they encounter. The Lord Jesus teaches us that "men always ought to pray and not lose heart" (Luke 18:1) and the Apostle commands the believers saying "Pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). **David the great, a king of Israel, very busy with his kingdom, used to say "I have set the Lord always before me" (Psalm 16:8).** "Seven times a day I praise You, because of Your righteous judgments" (Psalm 119:164). "At midnight I will rise to give thanks to You, because of Your righteous judgments" (Psalm 119:62).

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

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

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

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

FEELING THE PRESENCE OF GOD:

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

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

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

SHORT REPETITIVE PRAYERS:

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

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

We ask you dear brother to practice this beautiful wonderful exercise. It is not mere theoretical talk, but actual experience by many who live in it. There is nothing which prevents you from practising and enjoying it. It needs the feeling and awareness of the presence of the Beloved within you. The moment you are aware of His presence you will shout with the groom **"I found the one I love. I held him and would not let him go"** (Song 3:4). This exercise - like any other one - its perfection requires

practice and patience. In the beginning, it needs some effort and perseverance, but keeping at it with patience carries us to the state when we do it without toil or effort.

EXAMPLES:

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

This prayer was used since the early centuries of Christianity. It is mentioned in the writings of Saints Ephram, John Chrysostom, Isaac, Barsanuphius and John of the Ladder.

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

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

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

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

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

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

J) PRAYER ACCORDING TO RULES

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

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

(1) Having rules for prayer does not offend God

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

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

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

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

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

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

PRAYER OF THE PSALMS:

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

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

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

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

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

David encourages those who walk in the road of repentance by saying: "Do not remember the sins of my youth, nor my transgressions; O Lord" (Psalm 25:7). He lifts up those to whom God is gracious and urges them saying: "What shall I render to the Lord for all His benefits toward me?" (Psalm 116:12). He calls those who sinned to confess many times saying: "Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Your loving kindness (Psalm 51:1). He affirms those who are called for priesthood by saying: "O Lord, do not hide Your face from me" (Psalm 143:7). He teaches those who are taken to court saying: "O God, deliver me from the deceitful and unjust man!" (Psalm 43:1). He calms those who fear the enemies saying: "Deliver me from my enemies, O my God" (Psalm 59:1). He encourages the patient and thankful to praise God by his saying: "I waited patiently for the Lord; and He inclined to me, and heard my cry" (Psalm 40:1).

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

(1) David accumulated in his personality marvellous experiences:

He was a shepherd, a great prophet and a king and was the saint who sailed in the sky of the spirit. He was also whom God permitted to fall into two horrible sins which humiliated him and for

which he kept weeping and drenching his couch with his tears (Psalm 6:6) saying "My sin is always before me" (Psalm 51:3). Thus, in the psalms we find various experiences which certainly suit all our needs.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

HOW DO WE RECITE THE PSALMS?

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER 2

FASTING

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

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

A) SPIRITUAL UNDERSTANDING OF FASTING

Two concepts of fasting:

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

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

St. John Tebaisy said, “Fasting for the body is to be hungry for food, but fasting for the soul is to be hungry and thirsty for righteousness and fasting from doing evil.” St. Paul said, “Everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.” (1 Corinthians 9:25-27) Let us first discuss the subject of fasting in its general meaning: subduing the body.

Subduing the body:

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

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

Truly, what hinders the spiritual growth in virtues for anyone is the desires of the flesh. St. James says, “Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members?” (James 4:1) The spirit desires to be with God, but the body pulls it down and hinders its growth. **The flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things you wish**” (Galatians 5:17)

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

you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live” (Romans 8:13)

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

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

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

What is fasting?

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

B) SIGNIFICANCE OF FASTING FOR THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

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

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

First: in the Old Testament:

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

St. John Chrysostom said, “When God created the first man, He told him to fast to control himself. As a loving father, God was concerned about Adam’s salvation. He told him; “From all the fruits of the trees you can eat except the tree of the knowledge of evil and good, you cannot eat from that.” Is not this a form of fasting? Since fasting in paradise was important, how much more would it be outside the paradise!”

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

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

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

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

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

Judith fasted all her days after becoming a widow.

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

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

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

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

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

As for group fasting, we have the following examples: when the people of Nineveh fasted, (Jonah 3:5-10), when the Israelites fasted during their war with the Benjamites, (Judges 20:26) and the fasting of the people of Israel during the time of Samuel the prophet. (1 Samuel 7:6) Also, king Jehoshaphat declared a fasting throughout Judah when the Moabites and Ammonites came to fight him. (2 Chronicles 20:3) Again, Ezra asked all the people with him to fast when he was going to Jerusalem. He said, “Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before God. So we fasted and entreated our God for this, and He answered our prayer.” (Ezra 8:21, 23)

Second: In the New Testament:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Power of Fasting:

The best example, which shows the effectiveness of fasting, is that of the people of Nineveh. In spite of God’s threat to destroy the city after forty days, when He saw their fasting and meekness, He forgave them. “God relented from the disaster that He has said He would bring upon them and He did not do it.” (Jonah 3:10)

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

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

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

C) WHY DO I FAST?

1. Much food stirs up desires:

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

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

Drunkenness is not the only factor, which destroys the mind, but also the indulgence in eating. It takes away its power of clear thinking. The destruction of Sodom was not due to drunkenness only but also to the indulgence in food. The Lord rebuked Jerusalem saying, "This was the iniquity of your sister Sodom, fullness of food" (Ezekiel 16:49) Because of their fullness of food, they were kindled with the lust of the flesh. St. Filex said, "Heavy foods vanquish the body members with desires."

2. Fasting is a strong bridle for the body:

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

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

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

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

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

St. John Casian said, "We cannot start the struggle with our inner person unless we get rid of the vice of gluttony. We have to prove first that we are freed from submitting to the body, "for by whom a person is overcome, by him also he is brought into bondage." (2 Peter 2:19) St. Paul struggling according to the laws of the battle said, "Therefore I run thus, not with uncertainly. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified." (1 Corinthians 9:26-27) St. Paul directed the main part of his struggle toward his body, and he made the result of the battle simply depend on subduing it.

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

4. Fasting paves the way to virtues and gifts:

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

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

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

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

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

5. Fasting rectifies the body and trains the senses:

David, said, "I humbled myself with fasting." (Psalms 35:13) St. Paul says, "I discipline my body and bring it into subjection." (1 Corinthians 9:27) The expression "discipline" is usually used in revolutions. What does any nation do to control any revolution? It captures those who are revolting and puts them in prison. This is what fasting does. The body revolts. We capture the body and its senses by not giving them the things they desire. **Therefore, fasting is considered a period for rectifying the body by training its revolting senses with spiritual exercises.** When you do not give the body food and drink within reason, it has to yield and submit to the spirit.

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

6. Fasting gives us will power:

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

D) HOW DO I FAST?

1. By controlling oneself:

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

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

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

The labor of the body, if accompanied by a broken spirit, presents an acceptable sacrifice to God, and builds storage for holiness that is very valuable inside the pure heart. **If the body only fasts and we are still bound to many sins and certain spiritual vices, then we will not benefit from subduing the body as long as a precious part in us is defiled.** Therefore, when the outer man fasts, we should control also the inner man from harmful food. St. Paul urges us to present that inner man pure and holy to be worthy of receiving Christ inside us. “That Christ may dwell in your hearts” (Ephesians 3:17)

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

2. Humility:

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

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

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

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

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

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

3. Fasting and the “Period of Abstinence”:

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

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

In the Old Testament, the period of abstinence in fasting was clear. When **Moses fasted, he did not eat or drink.** (Exodus 34:28) **In the book of Judges,** we find that abstinence was observed until the evening. “Then all the children of Israel, that is, all the people, went up and came

to the house of God and wept. They sat there before the LORD and fasted that day until evening.” (Judges 20:26) When God described to Ezekiel how to fast, He told him, “And your food which you eat shall be by weight; **from time to time you shall eat it.** You shall drink also water by measure; from **time to time you shall drink.**” (Ezekiel 4: 10-11) **In Nineveh’s fasting, the people did not taste anything.** (Jonah 3:7)

4. Moderation in fasting:

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

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

The philosophers say that all virtues are mere means and an exaggeration is a vice. Do not exaggerate in fasting until you feel your heart will fail and you need others to help you or carry you. While you are subduing the desires of the body, you have to keep some physical strength so that you may be able to read the Holy Scriptures, to sing the psalms and to keep awake. **Fasting, in itself, is not a complete virtue, but it is a foundation upon which other virtues can be built. It is a step towards the holy road.**

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

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

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

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

5. Fasting and the kind of food:

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

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

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

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

6. Fasting does not weaken the body:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

7. Fasting and spiritual exercises:

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

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

8. Prayer to accompany fasting:

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

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

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

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

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

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

9. Fasting and giving alms:

The Lord clarified in His sermon on the mountain, the three basic factors in Christian worship: prayer, fasting, and giving alms. **As prayer accompanies fasting, so do alms, in order for the fasting to be acceptable.** The Lord made this clear through His speech to Isaiah about

acceptable fasting, "Is not this the fast that I have chosen: To loose the bonds of wickedness, To undo the heavy burdens, To let the oppressed go free, And that you break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, And that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out; When you see the naked, that you cover him, And not hide yourself from your own flesh?" (Isaiah 58:6-7) When God talked about Sodom's sin, He mentioned besides the fullness of bread (neglecting fasting), that it did not strengthen the hand of the poor and needy. (Ezekiel 16:49)

E) ADVICE AND GUIDELINES

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

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

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

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

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

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

5. **Never give excuses that you are unable to fast.** Do not let your body deceive you by pretending it is weak, or might become weak by fasting. The contrary is true; fasting gives manpower and energy and prevents many causes that may shorten one’s life. Most of the vegetarians live very long. St. Jerome said, “It is better that your stomach gets sick and not your soul. It is better that your knees tremble than your purity is shaken. Therefore, subdue and enslave your body so that you may not be shamed.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

F) FASTS OF THE COPTIC CHURCH

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

6. There is no period of abstinence on Saturdays and Sundays during the whole year except for the Saturday before Easter when Jesus was in the sepulchre. There is no fasting at all during the

fifty days after Easter. This is the only period when there is no fasting even on Wednesdays and Fridays. Fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays is not allowed if they coincide with a feast for Jesus Christ like Christmas or Epiphany.

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

CHAPTER 3

ALMSGIVING

"Blessed is he who considers the poor; the Lord will deliver him in time of trouble"
(Psalm 41:1)

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

A) A GENERAL WORD ABOUT GIVING

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

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

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

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

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

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

GOD AND RICHES

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

The Lord Jesus Who knows the thoughts of human hearts said "You cannot serve God and mammon" (Luke 16:13). He said to the rich young ruler who came running, to ask Him what should he do that he may inherit eternal life?, Jesus said to him "One thing you lack: Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the

cross, and follow Me". St. Mark says "But the rich man was sad at this word, and went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions". **Christ commented on this incident by saying "Children, how hard it is for those who trust in riches to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (Mark 10:17-25). The Lord Jesus also said "Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses" (Luke 12:15).**

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

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

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

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

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

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

TRUSTING IN RICHES

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

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

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

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

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

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

It is also supposed that the Christian does not live for himself, but loves his neighbour as himself. If a person owns many robes which he keeps for himself and beside him there are many naked men, and he shuts up his heart from them, the words of the Apostles apply to him "But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?" (1 John 3:17) and "Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries that are coming upon you!" (James 5:1).

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

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

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

THE VIRTUE OF MERCY IN GENERAL

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He also said "**Mercy advances other virtues and it has an absolute power. For example if you fast but have no mercy, the toil of your fasting will not benefit you. Again, if you keep purity and celibacy which are unparalleled in honor by the greatest of other virtues, because by them**

you resemble the angels, you will not be able to be in the presence of God if you are not merciful. Do you not see that the foolish (celibate) virgins were driven away from the presence of the Heavenly Groom for not acquiring the virtue of mercy with good deeds! (Matthew 25:12). How are the prudent wise virgins known? They are known from the fact that they combined celibacy with mercy, and they recognised the voice of the Heavenly Groom who said "I desire mercy and not sacrifice".

TO WHOM WE GIVE OUR ALMS

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

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

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

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

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

In the second, third and fourth centuries, there was a well known book entitled "The Shepherd" by Hermas. It was believed by many at that time, such as Origen, Osabious and Eronimos that Hermas is the person mentioned in the epistle to the Romans (Romans 16:14). Hermas writes "**Do good and from the production of your hands - which God gives you - give to all the needy in simplicity, without hesitation, to whom you are accustomed to give and to whom you are not. Give to all as God wants His giving be distributed to all. And those who take will give account to God, why and to which reason they have taken. Those who were in need and took will not be condemned. But those who took with false pretention will be punished. Hence he who gives is not blameworthy because as he accepted from God, likewise he completed his duty in simplicity without hesitation to those who are worthy and to those who are not worthy ...**".

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

distribution, or for selling them with cost prices.

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

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

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

THE GREATNESS OF ALMSGIVING

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

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

This virtue intercedes not only for the believers but also for the nonbelievers - it opens for them the door of faith and brings them to the sheepfold. This is what it did to Cornelius the centurion, an atheist, whom the Bible described as "A devout man and one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people" (Acts 10:1). He saw clearly, in a vision, an

angel of God coming in and saying to him "Cornelius! Your prayers **and your alms have come up for a memorial before God**" (Acts 10:3, 4) and the angel directed him to St. Peter the Apostle and he received the grace of Baptism at St. Peter's hands (Acts chapter 10).

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

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

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

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

No better evidence of the greatness of this virtue and our need to beautify ourselves with it, than what the Lord taught us. Namely, the deeds of mercy and almsgiving are among what qualify us for entering the Kingdom of Heaven. When He pictured the last scene on the frightening day of judgement He praised the righteous saying "Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me ... Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me" (Matthew 25:31-46).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The angel Raphael witnesses to that and encourages that almsgiving be done willingly and generously saying: Better prayer with fasting and almsgiving with righteousness ... **because almsgiving preserves a man from death and wipes out all sin** (Tobit 12:8, 9). **He points out that our prayers and fasting are less useful unless they are accompanied by almsgiving ... Again, the worry of King Nebuchadnezzar from a troubling dream was tackled by Daniel - to guard him from evil - a remedy by which to obtain divine help saying "Break off your sins by being righteous, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the poor. Perhaps there may be a lengthening of your prosperity"** (Daniel 4:27).

St. Basil the Great says "Because you did not have mercy upon others, no mercy is done to you also. Because you shut your door to the poor, God would not open the door of Heaven to you, and because you denied bread to the needy when they asked you, God would deny you the eternal life

which you asked for. You will gather what you have planted. If you have planted bitterness, you will gather bitterness. If you have planted cruelty, you will not gather but harsh troubles and great torments. **If you have escaped from doing mercy, mercy will escape from you. If you disliked the poor, He Who became poor in the love of you will dislike you ...**".

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

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

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

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

SOME BLESSINGS FROM GIVING ALMS

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

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

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

days" (Ecclesiastes 11:1).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The angel of the Lord appeared to this pious man and told him "Because of your merciful heart and the families which you care for, the Lord granted you 15 more years, the number of years He granted Ezekiel the King of Judah" (2 Kings 20:6). When the elder son went to see his

father he found him sitting down and well. His pale face changed to a face in which blood and life flowed. Everyone glorified God and magnified the deed of mercy and the old man actually lived fifteen more years after this incident.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

+ From the practical point, he who helps someone in difficulty, will have someone help him

when he is in difficulty. He who rescues a needy person or looks at a wretched person, God will provide for him people who will have mercy on him, without him knowing them.

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

B) GOD'S COMMANDS ABOUT GIVING

IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

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

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

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

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

Tobit commanded his son Tobias saying "**Give alms from what you possess and never give with a grudging eye. Do not turn your face away from any poor man, and God will not turn away his face from you. Let your almsgiving match your means ...** you will be laying up a sound insurance against the day of adversity. **Almsgiving saves the giver from death and keeps him from going down into darkness.** All who give alms are making an offering acceptable to the Most High" (Tobit 4:7-12).

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

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

Even more than that, because of the Lord's compassion upon the poor, He made Himself Father to the fatherless and Judge for the widows, caring for them and punishing those who deal unjustly with them, since they have nobody to care for them. The Prophet David said "**A father of the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in His holy habitation**" (Psalm 68:5). He also said "The Lord watches over the strangers; he relieves the fatherless and widow" (Psalm 146:9). Again he said "Lord, You have heard the desire of the humble; you will prepare their heart; you will cause Your ear to hear, to do justice to the fatherless and the oppressed, that the man of the earth may oppress no more" (Psalm 102:17, 18).

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

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

IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The Lord Jesus said much about almsgiving and kindness to the poor: "Sell what you have and give alms; provide yourselves money bags which do not grow old, a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches nor moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Luke 12:33, 34). "**But rather give alms** of such things as you have; then indeed all things are clean to you" (Luke 11:41). "But love your enemies, **do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return;** and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High. For He is kind to the unthankful and evil. **Therefore be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful**" (Luke 6:35, 36).

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

The teachings of Christ about almsgiving reflected on His Disciples and Apostles. **That was clear from their writings. Apostle Paul said** in his farewell speech to the priests of Ephesus "And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, **"It is more blessed to give than to receive"**" (Acts 20:35). He wrote to Timothy saying "Command those who are rich in this present age ... **that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share, storing up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life"**" (1 Timothy 6:17-19). At the end of his Epistle to the Hebrews, St. Paul told them "Let brotherly love continue. Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some have unwittingly entertained angels. Remember the prisoners as if chained with them-- those who are mistreated-- since you yourselves are in the body also" (Hebrews 13:1-3).

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

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

ALMSGIVING IN THE EARLY CHURCH

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

The writer of the book of Acts described the Church at that time by saying "And great grace was upon them all. Nor was there anyone among them who lacked; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, and laid them at the apostles' feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need" (Acts 4:33-35). See also (Acts 2:44, 45).

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

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

WHO ARE ASKED TO GIVE ALMS

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

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

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

C) HOW DO WE PRESENT OUR OFFERINGS?

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

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

1. AS PAY BACK TO A DEBT:

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

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

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

Not only we should give our alms to God but also beseech Him to accept them. **When the poor accepts your alms he has done you good.** Our teacher St. Paul expressed that by saying "For it pleased those from Macedonia and Achaia to make a certain contribution for the poor among the saints who are in Jerusalem ... Now I beg you, brethren, through the Lord Jesus Christ, and through the love of the Spirit, that you strive together with me in prayers to God for me, ... **that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints**" (Romans 15:26-31).

2. WITH SPIRIT OF LOVE:

Love in every matter, in every virtue, and in every practice is like the soul to the body. If the soul leaves the body, it would immediately die and soon rot. **Likewise any virtue without the**

spirit of love is rejected by God. Christianity lifts up our compassion and we sense the feelings of others "Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep" (Romans 12:15). It is said about the Lord that "He sympathizes with our weaknesses" (Hebrews 4:15).

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

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

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

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

3. WILLINGLY:

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

4. WITH SELF-DENIAL

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

Concerning giving and alms, the Lord Jesus said "Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in

heaven. Therefore, when you do a charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory from men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. **But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, that your charitable deed may be in secret;** and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly" (Matthew 6:1-4).

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

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

5. GENEROUSLY ACCORDING TO YOUR ABILITY:

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

St. Paul spoke frequently about this point. He said in a command to his Disciple Timothy: "Command those who are rich in this present age ... to do good, that they be rich in good works, **ready to give, willing to share**" (1 Timothy 6:17, 18), and said to the Romans "**He who gives, with liberality ...**" (Romans 12:8). He also said to the Corinthians about the believers in Macedonia "Moreover, brethren, we make known to you the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia: that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded **in the riches of their liberality. For I bear witness that according to their ability, yes, and beyond their ability, they were freely willing,** imploring us with much urgency that we would receive the gift and the fellowship of the ministering to the saints. And not only as we had hoped, **but they first gave themselves to the Lord,** and then to us by the will of God" (2 Corinthians 8:1-5).

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

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

Sapphira (Acts chapter 5).

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

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

6. JOYFULLY AND HAPPILY:

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

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

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

7. FROM HONEST EARNING:

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

does not anoint my head". Likewise, the giving of the wicked is not accepted by the Church.

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

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

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

D) TITHES

ERA BEFORE THE LAW:

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

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

ERA OF THE LAW:

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

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

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

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

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

It seems that the Law specified that this tithe which is for God, was to be given to the Levites

(the servants of God) who had no inheritance in their land, like their brothers. The Lord said to Aaron: "You shall have no inheritance in their land, nor shall you have any portion among them; I am your portion and your inheritance among the children of Israel. Behold, I have given the children of Levi all the tithes in Israel as an inheritance in return for the work which they perform, the work of the tabernacle of meeting, ... for the tithes of the children of Israel, which they offer up as a heave offering to the Lord, I have given to the Levites as an inheritance; therefore I have said to them, "Among the children of Israel they shall have no inheritance"" (Numbers 18:20, 21, 24).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

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

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

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

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

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

It is true that we do not read in the New Testament about a definite system for giving, as if giving is a freewill action or arbitrary, and no definite amounts are set to be given to the Church such as the tithes in the Old Testament. This is clarified from the story of Ananias and his wife Sapphira

"While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control?" (Acts 5:4). Their action was without any compelling or obligation. **Yet the obligation results from the inner feeling.**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

St. Erinaous again compares between the enslavement of Moses' Law and the freeing of Christian sonship. He says "**For this reason, while they (the Jews) regarded the tithes of their possessions be specified to God, on the contrary of that, those who received the freedom made serving God as their wealth, with joy and liberty, not giving less, but according to their great belief"**

In the third century: The scholar Origen in his defence for offering the firstfruits, also

mentioned the tithes, not as a duty for the Christians but as a lower limit over which **the Christians** should pay.

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

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

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

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

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

In the fifth century: St. Eronios in explaining Chapter 3 of Malachi, said "What we said about the tithes and the firstfruits of the land which from the past used to be given from the people to the priests and the Levites, that was followed by the people of the Church who were commanded to sell all they had, give to the poor and follow the Lord. If we are not prepared to do that, we should at least follow the early teachings of the Jews and give a portion of the whole to the poor and give due respect to the priests and Levites. If someone does not accept that, he is accused of stealing and deceiving God.

St. Augustine in explaining Psalm 146 said: "First separate a part and make a certain percentage, specify a good portion of your income. Do you pay the tithes? Separate the tithe, though it may be very small". In his sermon number 48, after he mentioned that the increasing taxes in his time

was imposed on the people because they do not give God what is His, said "Almsgiving should be paid according to the measure and quantity as specified in (Tobit 4:8) "Let your almsgiving match your means. If you have little, do not be ashamed to give the little you can afford".

Now after we reviewed some of the sayings of the Church fathers in the first five centuries of Christianity, about giving, we say that the Lord Jesus teaches us that we should give more than the tithe, which is the specified limit in the Law of the Old Testament. It is supposed in the Testament of Grace, that our righteousness exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 5:20). Christianity which presents to us love in its superb form, demands us to give according to our means, as a means of expressing love. Yet because of diminished love and weak faith, we have no choice but to ask for the tithe as a lower limit and no less.

E) SOME OBJECTIONS AGAINST GIVING

Some people refuse to give the tithes of their incomes to the Lord - although it is the lowest limit of giving - **arguing that they have too many financial expenses and say:** "what is needed for the home is denied to the Church".

A second group of people shy from giving alms in order to save for the future. They say that life's circumstances require it, and one cannot trust the future.

There is a third group who do not really like giving, and if they do, it will be a trivial quantity not proportional to their income. For them it is enough to put few pennies in the Church collection plate, while their tithes are much more than that. The argument of this group is aimed against some of the clergy and their behaviour towards money. If they are asked "why do you not give to the poor?", they answer that all or most of them pretend to be poor while they are professional beggars.

THE FIRST OBJECTION:

There are many financial expenses in life: We reply by enumerating the many and wonderful promises of God for generous givers, which we mentioned earlier. If God has promised that for the sake of a cup of cold water, one shall by no means lose his reward (Matthew 10:42; Mark 9:41), how much would the reward be for him who feeds and clothes the Lord in the person of the hungry and the naked! **The problem of our era is faith. People love by their minds only, without giving faith a chance to work in them.**

A man who dispenses his monthly salary with no portion of it to God, makes a big mistake, as many people do. **Their giving may be out of their abundance, not from their livelihood.** The Lord praised the poor widow who put two mites in the treasury **"for they all put in out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put"** (Mark 12:44). We know that the Lord Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, and should deal with Him accordingly. **That is to make the Lord number one in our giving,** and in everything.

In this respect we should remember the words of the man of God Elijah to the widow of Zarephath of Sidon at the time of famine. She apologized that she could not give him a morsel of bread by saying "I have only a handful of flour in a bin, and a little oil in a jar, and I may go in and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die". But Elijah's answer was **"Do not fear; go and do as you have said, but make me a small cake from it first, and afterward make some for yourself and your son"** (1 Kings 17:11-13). **That is Elijah, man of God first, then she and her son last, the Lord first then you and your children last.**

This is the secret of the blessing; God first. This is exactly what happened; the bin of flour was not used up, nor did the jar of oil run dry (1 Kings 17:14) until God granted rain again for the land. The man of God Elijah was not selfish to ask for himself first, but he was sure of the blessings of the Lord which was going to descent on this widow as a result of her deed. We should not forget that when the widow honored Elijah and was hospitable to him, that was not for him as much as was for God Himself, whose servant was Elijah "who honors you honors Me".

THE SECOND OBJECTION (SAVING):

We mentioned that a group of people do not offer alms in order to save for the future and life's unexpected circumstances. **We wish to present the proper view concerning saving.** To do that, let us **define two main kinds of savings:**

(1) Saving by just collecting money: when someone saves whatever remains from his needs without any necessity or cause for spending it in the future. **Christianity forbids this kind of saving and considers it as love of money.** "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth" (Matthew 6:19) applies to that.

(2) There is another kind which we may also call saving, which is saving certain amounts of money for spending them in one lot for a basic, important and necessary purpose. From the technical point, such a person is saving money, but from the real practical point, this money is not being saved, but it is spent before collecting it, since it awaits to be spent. **This saving is permitted by Christianity, because it is not love of money or laying up treasures.**

As an example is the father who saves money to pay it in one lot for his children's education at the beginning of the year. Another example is the father who saves some money for the wedding of his daughter. He is not laying up treasures, as in most cases he spends this saved money and puts himself in debt to pay the rest of the bills. **It is proper for the Christian to prepare himself for certain occasions and saves for them, provided it is not without faith and trust in God, and his saving does not contradict Christian love which necessitates that he does not neglect the needs and feelings of his brethren. He should also be honest in presenting his giving to God, which is the tithes as a lower limit.**

We summarise that there is no objection in such cases for saving money, provided that it is not for the love of money itself, but for meeting necessary expenses, and not for unnecessary matters and also not on the expense of our obligation towards God. It should not also conflict with our trust in God and His care for us and our children. The Lord Jesus commanded us saying: "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things" (Matthew 6:34).

St. Kebrianos the bishop and martyr said "Give to God your wealth which you keep as an inheritance for your descendants. Make Him the guardian for your children. Make Him their Lord and keeper by His Holy Majesty against all evils in the world".

Concerning the third kind of objection against giving, we have already dealt with when we discussed the subject about to whom we should give our offerings.

F) EXAMPLES OF GENEROUS GIVERS

The Holy Bible gave us examples of many of God's people who loved the Lord and hence loved doing mercy with their giving. **Among those are Job the righteous** who used to be "the greatest of all the people of the East" (Job 1:3). In spite of his riches, he was merciful. We find that from his sayings: "Because I delivered the poor who cried out, the fatherless and he who had no helper. The blessing of a perishing man came upon me, and I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy. I was eyes to the blind, and I was feet to the lame. I was a father to the poor, ..." (Job 29:12-15). If I have kept the poor from their desire, or caused the eyes of the widow to fail, or eaten my morsel by myself, so that the fatherless may not eat of it ... If I have seen anyone perish for lack of clothing, or any poor man without covering; ... Then let my arm fall from my shoulder, let my arm be torn from the socket" (Job 31:16-22).

There was another personality in the Apostolic time. She was Tabitha about which the Bible said "This woman was full of good works and charitable deeds". Her merciful deeds which interceded for her, and St. Peter raised her after she died" (Acts 9:36-41)

The Church history is also full of merciful personalities, who pleased God by their good deeds. We only speak about three of them; two lay people and a clergy:

1. ST. PETER THE WORSHIPPER:

He started his life as a tax collector, harsh in his dealings, and extreme miser and mean. People called him the merciless. One day a poor man came asking him for an alms, and he refused him. But this poor continued asking him. It happened that the servant of the rich man arrived carrying loaves of bread. So he took one loaf and threw it in the face of the poor, aiming to hit him. But the poor person bent down, got the bread and went away.

The Lord wanted to change the heart of this rich man and to destroy the idol which he had in his heart. That night, he saw a dream, as if it was the day of judgement and he was standing in front of the angels. **He had no good deeds except the loaf of bread with which he had hit the poor man.** He woke up terrified from his dream and kept thinking and blaming himself for his ruthlessness.

This was how his meanness and nastiness changed to a great mercy, **to the extent that after he distributed all his wealth to the poor, he did not find anything else to give except his robe. So he sold it and gave its price alms to the poor.** It was said that when he did not find anything else in his ownership in his town, he left it, sold himself as a slave and gave the price to the poor.

When the news of his virtues spread, he went to the Sheheit Desert and spent the rest of his life in ascetic worshipping. He deserved to know the time of his departure from this world. The Coptic Church celebrates his feast on 25 Tobah, 2 February, every year.

2. MOALEM IBRAHIM EL-GOHARY:

He was a high level public servant when the Turks and Mummeluk governed Egypt. Yet he was an extremely humble and loving person. **He was distinguished by his mercy and his almsgiving.** It was said that he used to divide his income into three parts. Two thirds went to the poor, for writing religious books, rebuilding demolished churches and monasteries, buying properties and awarding their ownerships to the Churches and monasteries. He used to send regular offerings yearly to the monasteries.

Concerning mercy and his love to giving, he was fulfilling the command of his Lord "Give to everyone who asks of you" (Luke 6:30), especially those who asked him in the Name of Christ. Yet in his dealings he did not distinguish between Christians and non-Christians.

Once, a poor man wanted to test his known generosity. He followed him in his way to work asking for an alms in the name of Christ. Moalem Ibrahim gave him. After taking the alms, the man went to another street intersecting him asking for alms in a way to show that he is the same person who took from him before. Moalem Ibrahim still gave him. **This repeated 18 times,** and Moalem Ibrahim gave him alms each time and was not irritated from the poor man. At the end the poor man was so amazed and cried out saying to him "Ibrahim, blessed are you, the Lord be with you". **He replied in a humble way saying "Do not be surprised, you ask me for money for which I am steward and the steward should not worry!"**.

He used to feed the poor in the churches. One day in the church of St. Barbara in Old Cairo, he saw that the people in charge did not do their duty properly. He rebuked them saying "Do not break the hearts of the weak poor, be nice to them. The Lord commanded us to be hospitable to those who could not repay us".

He was even an almsgiver from his grave! It happened that a poor man came searching for Moalem Ibrahim at his house after he died. When they told him that he had died and directed him to his grave, the man went there and sat down crying until he slept. He saw Moalem Ibrahim in a dream telling him "Do not cry, there is a person, the owner of such shop owed me a certain amount of money. Go to him and ask him for this money". This dream repeated three times. Yet because of the repetition of the dream, the poor man in a timid way went and stood in front of the shop of this person. When the owner of the shop heard the story of the dream, he gave the man the money which he owed Moalem Ibrahim and praised God.

It happened also after his death that some evil people falsely reported to the ruler that his daughter, called Demiana, had the wealth of her father. Since the country's economy was extremely bad the ruler called the daughter to investigate the matter. The daughter did not object and asked for few days to bring the wealth of her father. After a few days she went to the ruler and took with her the poor and needy people whom her father used to help. They formed a huge crowd! **She said to the ruler "The wealth of my father is kept in the bellies of those" and she pointed to the crowd.** When the ruler knew the truth, he let her go and remembered the good deeds of her father.

This is a side of the life of the righteous giver Moalem Ibrahim El-Gohary who slept in the Lord in 1795. He was remembered by Bishop Yousab of Girga in 1796, in an emotional word saying

"Priests and ministers, gather together, dress in sacks and remember him who used to revisit the churches with his offerings and oblations ...".

3. ANBA ABRAAM LATE BISHOP OF FAYOUM:

A famous man, the saint of the twentieth century, good shepherd and maker of miracles. **This man had a personality with many facets, the one which distinguished him is his mercy and his almsgiving**, in any job he had.

When he was appointed a deputy bishop in the city of Minya, he converted the place to a shelter for the strangers, orphans, and for the fatherless and the poor.

When he was the head of El-Moharak monastery, he opened he doors of the monastery to the poor, the needy and the widows. Satan moved some of the monks against him and cried the old cry which Juda Escariot previously cried "what a waste?!". They accused him of wasting the resources of the monastery!. They persisted until he was fired as the head of the monastery and they dismissed the poor whom he took care of.

When he was ordained Bishop of Fayoum, he excelled in doing mercy to the extent that he gave everything he owned. One day a penniless man came to ask him for money to spend on his wife who gave birth to a baby. The Bishop gave him one pound, all he had at that moment. When the poor man went out, he was met by the deputy of the Bishop who knew that he had received a pound. The deputy took the pound from him and replaced it by a fifth of a pound. The poor man returned to the Bishop and told him what happened. The Bishop called his deputy, rebuked him for his hard heart, and lack of his faith and asked him to return the pound to the poor man, not to take back the firth of the pound and to give him also a quilt because it was winter. When the deputy protested the Bishop said "The Lord will provide". After the poor man left, the Bishop received from one of the believers a money order for ten pounds and an invoice for receiving ten units of wheat.

One day a poor woman went to him when the Bishop had no money. But someone had given him a shawl which he never used. He apologised to the woman that he had no money, gave her the shawl saying that she may sell it and use the money. The woman took it and went to the market to sell it. There the owner of the shawl saw her, bought it from her and returned it to the Bishop. Before giving the shawl to the Bishop he asked him "Father why did you not use the shawl as it is cold these days?". The Bishop replied "The shawl is upstairs my son" meaning that it is with Jesus. Then the man presented the shawl and returned it to him. The Bishop said "I hope you gave the poor woman the right price". The man replied, "Yes father, I gave her the right price".

There are many written and unwritten stories about this saint who was a great example in ascetic life, selflessness and love to the poor.

The Lord gives us to imitate him and benefit us by accepting his intercessions and prayers for us.