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ΠΙΜΟΝΑΧΟΣ

A monthly newsletter with monastic issues for today's youth

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Toward a Sound View of Celibacy

By H.G. Bishop Moussa



Is celibacy the condition of not being married? Yes, celibacy in general is not marrying, for the celibate person does not get married. However, that is not all. A bachelor does not get married either, but there is a great and basic difference between the bachelor and the celibate.

Let us review the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, to Him be glory, when he taught about celibacy after he had discussed marriage and divorce, "His disciples said to him: 'If such is the case of the man with his wife, it is better not to marry.' But He said to them, 'All cannot accept this saying, but only those to whom it has been given. For there are eunuchs who were born thus from their mother's womb, and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He who is able to accept it, let him accept it!'" (Mt. 18:10-12). Thus, the celibate person is the one who made himself a eunuch for the kingdom of heaven's sake.

Our Lord Jesus Christ, to Him be glory, said: "but only those to whom it has been given..... He who is able to accept it, let him accept it." We wonder why He did not say this when He taught about prayer, or charity, or fasting, or when He completed the law of the Old Testament. The answer is clear; everyone has to accept these virtues and pursue them as they are necessary and useful for their salvation. But as for those who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven, not everyone is able to do it, but only those to whom it is given.

Celibacy, as well as being a gift granted by God, is also a holy unity, a strong and holy bond with Christ Who sanctifies all the bonds of marriage. This unity is totally confirmed, first of all, by the element of love which gives determination and purpose. It is this love that gives all future striving meaning and value; it grants to those to whom it is given, a pure will, that does not rebel. It gives them a strong faith and great boldness that makes them turn their back on the whole world with all its pleasures, to desire Christ and to be enlightened by His love.



The celibate, who has fixed his eyes, his emotions, and his will as a special bride on the Beloved, devotes his life for the sake of Christ Himself. He does not consecrate it to any work or service however great, but, as the Lord says, for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. This holy objective gives the service of the consecrated celibate the power of witnessing. St. Paul the Apostle was a celibate and served and ministered as the greatest minister in Christianity. Fiery Elijah, who was celibate, carried out the greatest of tasks; the secret of his power was that he fixed his eyes on the God of his holy fathers and was jealous with the jealousy of the Lord.

Just as the bride leaves her home, her family, and her people to belong to the man who has become her head, all her love, and all her people, so does the soul do the same, if not more. The celibate soul becomes a special bride of Christ's, leaving all its interests and business to walk in the way and in the light of its Bridegroom. It knows the paths of its Lord and His footsteps as He climbs the mountain of Golgotha. So it follows Him fearlessly and without hesitation. It drinks with Him the cup with delight and tastes suffering with Him happily. In spite of this, it is drunk with love and rejoices with hope. When it contemplates the glory that awaits her with the Beloved, it's suffering is made lighter. It's whole being is emptied of the love of the world with all it's beauties and pleasures because it has become the bride of the Victorious One Who has victory over the world, the Lord Jesus Christ, the real Bridegroom. This holy unity and living bond is comprehended by the celibate individual as he does not despise or look down on marriage, for he did not become celibate in an attempt to escape marriage.

Therefore, his attitude to marriage is a holy and humble one. However, he follows the teachings of St. Paul the Apostle when he said: "But I want you to be without care. He who is unmarried cares for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please the Lord. But he who is married cares about the things of the world, how he may please his wife. There is a difference between a wife and a virgin. The unmarried woman cares about both the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in spirit. But he who is married cares about the things of the world, how she may please her husband." (1 C o r . 7 : 3 2 - 3 4) .

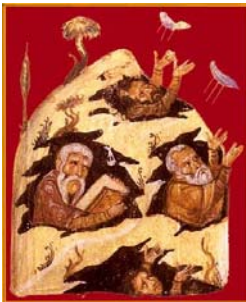
For the sake of the undivided heart and of the surpassing love that fills the heart of the celibate, he consecrates his life to Christ so that Christ may become all his preoccupation and all his love, and that he might become wholly: body, soul, and spirit, a temple of the Lord and a holy dwelling place for Him.

When he offers all his life a sacrifice of love, he cannot boast or feel that he has done anything greater than the married person. This is for the simple reason that he is aware of the truth, that celibacy is a grace and a free gift from above. If the celibate makes the error of boasting, he falls from this lofty love and distorts the beauty of celibacy.



PRAYER

By: One of the youth



Matanias, agpia prayers, the Jesus prayer, and contemplations on psalms...these are prayers and supplications made to God by all monks, who, living in isolation, devote themselves entirely to our Lord, pleasing him by perfecting themselves in love, through His grace. But these prayers, while they hold a prominent part amongst monks, clergy and devout laymen alike, need also become a part of the *average* Christian living in this secular world. Living a life of prayer in the world is a principle taught from the patristic era and of course from the Scripture itself (Ephesians 6:18). From these beautiful sources of Scripture and Tradition,

one can learn how to imitate Christ, as our monastic fathers, while living our own daily lives - wherever it may be. Given that, this is only a short article, I will only discuss briefly two facets of one's prayer life: the difficulty of prayer at home and the Jesus Prayer.

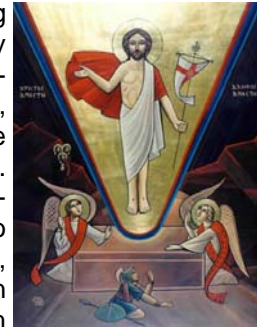
The Difficulty of prayer: More often than not, the difficulty in prayer comes not from enmity towards God, nor even ignorance of Him, but rather from laziness. Sloth, has made the devil triumphant countless of times in stopping us from prayer. Now, I dare not give advice on prayer, so in this short section I will use the wisdom of St Theophan the Recluse to describe how one can be truly fervent in prayer. Whilst one will always struggle to stand up (or kneel) to pray, there will always be that second struggle, ever so important, and that is the act of prayer in itself! St Theophan describes prayer as a feeling of closeness to God as well as an unwavering concentration toward Him. So we can conclude, by that definition, that standing up and reading out of our agpia while thinking about what we're going to do at the conclusion of our 'prayer' is not actually prayer at all. Standing before God for one hour reciting the agpia without concentration is not prayer. St Theophan goes on, indirectly, to describe preparatory measures for an effective prayer, through the use of all the senses, and this is what will be discussed here.

A struggle with most people (regardless of one's spiritual level) is the lack of concentration during prayer. Often this is because one or more of our senses are being a source of distraction. For example, while praying during the mass, we may be citing responses with our lips, hearing with our ears while raising our hands to God, and yet, our eyes might be wandering to the other side of the congregation! This is not prayer. Instead, we need to be focused at all times. We need, especially in the early stages when we are trying to enhance our prayer and spiritual life (*which is a constant battle*), to activate all our senses in prayer. As in the above example, our eyes need not be wandering towards our friends, but towards the east, towards the Altar, towards the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. The best way to stop one sense (or more) from being a form of distraction is to find a way to get that particular sense involved in prayer. In our homes, for our ears, let us give glory to God, reciting our Agpia prayers



and making our supplications aloud. For our eyes, let us place holy icons before us as we face the east. For our body's restlessness, let us bow our heads before God, with outstretched hands or by prostrating ourselves before God, as Moses did countless times in the wilderness when making supplication on behalf of the unfaithful Israelites (Exodus 32:11-13). Fr Mekhail El Behery (*a contemporary saint who lost his sight and hearing due to old age*) was once asked by one of his disciples, "why do you still insist on coming to pray at church even though you can't see or even hear the praises?" The saint replied "it is enough that I come to church and smell the sweat aroma of incense, this alone makes me feel I am in heaven." So let us use the tools our Orthodox Church gave us, so that we are truly communicating with our Lord, when we are praying.

The Jesus Prayer: Often there is a void between a morning prayer and the prayer before you sleep. The majority of the day is spent without the smallest consideration or perhaps even inclination towards God. We are too busy focusing on our work, study or ways in which we can enjoy our day. Here, I give the advice of the desert fathers, "Just pray – O Lord Jesus Christ". The very mention of the name of our Lord and Saviour throughout the day is enough to move the Spirit inside us. We need to stir the Spirit within us at all times. Of course, the Jesus Prayer, as we know it stands completely as: "O Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner." Its development through the ages is quite interesting and more can be read about it in Archimandrite Lev Gillet's book "The Jesus Prayer".



So one may ask: Why does the Jesus Prayer hold such a prominent place amongst the holy fathers, the monks, and all the devout of the church? If you break down this beautiful prayer, even on a very superficial level as you will see, one can begin to understand its depth. We start with: "O Lord Jesus Christ" – this statement in itself is a declaration of our Lord as Saviour and redeemer, to whom we owe honour and glory, for "there is one Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 8:6). We then pray: "Son of God." Here we confess the divinity of Christ, the only begotten of the Father (John 1:14), who is of same essence (*homo-ousios*) with the Father. Now, having given glory to God, we make our supplication: "*have mercy on me*". We imitate the tax collector (Luke 18:13) whose repentance was accepted unlike the hypocritical Pharisee who did nothing but boast and ridicule that who was truly contrite in heart, which is pleasing to God (Psalm 51:17). It is because of God's mercy and grace that entering through the gates of heaven is made possible, so let us beg for it! After asking God for mercy, we confess ourselves as sinners "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23) and "for there is none righteous...not one" (Romans 3:10). We can only better ourselves in the Spirit by recognizing our sinful state, from which we need to be delivered through God's grace, towards holiness and true piety. See how great such a short prayer is? Use it!



Holiness and Virtues

By: Tim Vivian

The American writer and farmer Wendell Berry has trenchantly observed that "It is impossible to prefigure the salvation of the world in the same language by which the world has been dismembered and defaced." One defacing of the modern western world has been the amputation of holiness from our common vocabulary and more importantly, lived ethic. When does one even hear about holiness from the pulpit much less from the secular pulpits of government, education, science, and industry? It was not always so. Holiness once mattered. "Be holy, for I Am holy." says the Lord (Lev 11:44). But what is holiness? More importantly, what characteristics does a holy person have? In other words, how does a holy person concretely manifest holiness in his or her life? Jesus, we might be surprised to learn, does not explicitly define holiness or its characteristics, although that great compendium "the Sermon on the Mount" (Mt 5) might be better titled "the Sermon on Holiness." What does early monastic spirituality have to say about holiness? The *Apophthegmata*, or Sayings of the desert fathers and mothers, like Jesus, do not explicitly define holiness although one could entitle that collection "The Book of Holiness" most perhaps all of its sayings are concerned with what constitutes holy behaviour.

The early Monastic Mothers and Fathers (4th to 6th centuries) often spoke in terms of "virtues." and these, taken singly or together, can serve as lexicon, map and lived territory of holiness. Wendell Berry understands how the virtues contribute to holiness. Virtues "are good" he says, not because they have been highly recommended but because they are necessary; they make for unity and harmony. Evagrius of Pontus, the first great monastic systematic theologian is known partly for his list of Eight Evil Thoughts, the precursors to the medieval Seven Deadly Sins, which at first seem to focus on disharmony; but Evagrius is less well known for the lengthier antidotes or virtues that he supplies immediately afterwards for these evil thoughts and that point towards harmony. The virtues or Virtues were in fact so important to monks at Bawit in Middle Egypt in late antiquity (3rd - 5th century) that they personified them and painted them in medallions on a wall in their monastery, giving them a "patron saint", Ama Sibylla. The Virtues were variously numbered either 10, 11, or 12 although the names of some of the Virtues surrounding Ama Sibylla at Bawit have been effaced over the centuries; the ones that survive are Faith, Hope, Humility, Chastity, Gentleness, Grace and Patience. Paul of Tamma, a monk of Middle Egypt, offers a lively and somewhat surprising, image of the Virtues: "And the Holy Spirit will illumine all your members, and the twelve Virtues will dance in the midst of our soul, and the Cherubim and the Seraphim will shelter you beneath their wings." Stephen of Thebes, another monk of Middle Egypt, with a different metaphor names eleven "powers" or virtues:



Sitting in your cell, do not act like it is a tomb but rather behave like it is a banquet room filled with gold that has guards protecting- it night and day. The "guards" are the powers of God that protect your spirit, that is, knowledge and faith and patience and abstinence, sincerity and innocence, purity and chastity, love, concord and truth.

In a saying attributed to St John the Little and, in the Coptic tradition, to St Macarius the Great, the abba gives one of the longest extant lists of holy attributes as he exhorts his disciple to "practice every virtue and every commandment of God." St John (or St Macarius) importantly makes these attributes part of monastic praxis; he instructs the monk "when you get up in the morning each day, make it the beginning of your life as a monk." He then goes on to list what this "beginning" consists of:

Fearfully practice perseverance and patience; demonstrate a love of God and a love of people with a humble heart and bodily humility, with mourning and the distress of being confined in prison, with prayers and supplications and groans, with purity of tongue while humbly guarding your eyes, without anger, in peace, without returning evil to an evildoer, without passing judgement on those in need without thinking of yourself in anything, placing yourself below every creature; with renunciation of material things and fleshy things, with the struggle of the cross, with spiritual poverty, with good free will and bodily asceticism, with fasting and repentance and tears, with the combat war brings and returning from imprisonment, with pure counsel and the tasting of goodness, quietly at midday; with manual work, with vigils, with numerous prayers, with hunger and thirst, with frost and nakedness and afflictions and the acquisition of your tomb as though you had already been placed in it, placing your death near you day after day, lost in the deserts and mountains and holes of the earth" [Heb 11:38].

A vital assumption of all the monastic sayings is that holiness and the embodying of virtues are not the cordoned off sanctuary of a privileged few, but can be manifested by anyone. We should not, however, be too easily egalitarian here: another assumption of many of the early monastic sayings is that their interlocutor is a disciple, a seeker, a person who has left "the world"-that is, its disordered values and is out in the desert; he prompts the recorded saying by asking how he may be saved. As Arsenius bluntly puts it, the virtues are acquired by hard work.

Holiness gradually came to be seen more and more in the person of the holy man (and more rarely, it seems, holy woman); eventually, holiness re-



sided less in the holy person and more in his or her relics. Even in the earliest period of monasticism, however, holiness was often seen, especially by outsiders, as the special provenance of the monks; hence the onslaught of pilgrims into the desert in the fourth century, both spiritual tourists and authentic pilgrims. Abba Daniel of Scetis, 6th-century priest and monastic superior of Scetis (*modern Wadi al-Natrun, northwest of Cairo*), was both a holy man and a witness to holiness. The collection of tales surrounding his name offers the modern reader an important view of one perception of holiness in late antique Egypt. The understanding of holiness is neither all encompassing nor definitive. But the desert fathers do offer a different and unusual slant on holiness, one that may cause us to adjust our perceptions of holiness today.

We would also like to thank our Gracious Lord for His great blessings in completing the project of Asphaltting the roads and the car parking area of the Monastery





Question & Answer

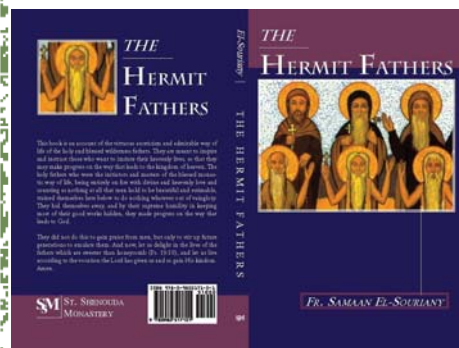
Is Celibacy something you have to work hard to attain or is it a Gift from God?

Those who think that being celibate is merely a struggle on the part of the individual are wrong, no matter how holy that struggle is. Otherwise our Lord would not have said: "but only to whom it has been given and he who is able to accept it, let him accept it."

Therefore, celibacy it is a gift granted by God to individuals whose hearts He has examined, whose ardent love that pervades their life He knows. They have made eunuchs of themselves for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. This reveals the extent and greatness of their surpassing love.

The celibate offers his life as a holy sacrifice, a sacrifice of love. It is true that everybody is invited to the kingdom, and everyone longs for the kingdom, and all are members in the body of Christ, but the soul of the celibate is a special bride of Christ.

This does not mean that being celibate automatically stops the wars of Satan regarding celibacy or that celibates are free of trials regarding their celibacy, but as athletes, whom the hardship of their training counts for nothing, compared to the great price awaiting them.



"THE HERMIT FATHERS"

By: Fr Samaan El Souriany

St Shenouda Monastery, with the Kind permission of the translators and after a long time being out of print, has reprinted "*The Hermit Fathers*". For those who are interested please contact the monastery. The monastery will not sell single copies over the net, but if you are interested in buying a number of copies for your bookshop or youth group please email us. The price of the book is AUD \$ 8.00

This book is an account of the virtuous asceticism and admirable ways of life of the holy and blessed wilderness fathers. They are meant to inspire and instruct those who want to imitate their heavenly lives, so that they may make progress on the way that leads to the kingdom of heaven. The holy fathers who were the initiators and masters of the blessed monastic way of life, being entirely on fire with divine and heavenly love and counting as nothing at all that men hold to be beautiful and estimable, trained themselves on earth to do nothing whatsoever out of vainglory. They hid themselves away, and by their supreme humility in keeping most of their good works hidden, they made progress on the way that leads to God. Moreover, no one has been able to describe their virtuous lives for us in detail, for those who have taken the greatest pains in this matter have only committed to writing a few fragments of their more admirable deeds and words. In this book you will find twenty eight examples of the lives of those Holy men and women which are sweeter than honey and honeycomb.