

Holiness

By Bishop George Khodr

Holiness is our aim. The great things that come with and after the first ‘breeze of Grace’ are all accomplished with much effort. You are the one to desire Grace, receive it and work on its fruitfulness in your life, since you are the ground for it. And this is possible for you because God loves you and you are able to obey Him even to the shedding of blood in case He asks that from you.

When we call someone to holiness he often responds by saying: “What? Do you think I am Christ?” meaning to say that holiness is something exceptional reserved for an elect and especially those who are in monasticism. People think this way maybe because most of those whose holiness has been announced, except those who had been martyred, are monks. Yet we have in our church many saints who are married; among them are kings, soldiers and farmers since the Christian life is not in the quantity of prayers said, but in the purity of heart, and right belief and in humility, forgiveness and love. For righteousness is not the monopoly of the monks and Church ministers; it is a quality of life of domesticating the harmful desires and enkindling those that build one’s self and others. It is in having one’s heart and intention become a living Gospel; so that whenever Christ is revealed in someone through word and behavior, the Gospel message is there written but in human life.

Those who are associated with the Lord and are attached to Him from the beginning of Christianity until now, those are the Church. Those had the Holy Spirit teach them when their priest did not or were at times harmful. Most of those in the Church are like human litter, and only the few who are purified have been reared by God from Heaven. They achieved such purity by applying themselves to practices, though done by others without spirit, understanding and conviction, but by them (the pure) with a loving heart driven by divine strength.

This does not mean that we do not consider others who can be an example for us. We can imitate those in whom we see Christ. There is a tradition in acquiring righteousness which monasticism is founded on; it is that the beginner is raised by a spiritual father (guide) who helps him grow in Christ. The same applies to those who are not in monasticism, but in both situations it is based on repentance and spiritual warfare. Yet not every priest can be a spiritual guide (father). In our liturgical books, the title “spiritual father” is given to the priest, but often this was far from reality in the sense that not every priest can “give you birth” in Christ. Besides, St. Nilus who lived in the wilderness of Soura in Russia says that if you do not find a spiritual guide (father), take the Holy Scriptures as your father because there is enough guidance in it. That implies that you become by God’s

grace a “devourer” of His words imbibing them so fully into your being that you become the Word itself.

Thus those who desire holiness flourish in it and wax spiritually either with him who has acquired the heritage of righteousness (i.e. the spiritual guide) or through the word of God directly.

“It is God’s will that you should be sanctified” 1Thess.4: 3. These words are for all in the Church, and not only for a few who hold certain positions and responsibilities. God also says in 1Peter 1: 16: “Be holy as I am holy.” That verse does not refer to the Saints the Church has already proclaimed; there are many saints in Heaven who were not proclaimed so by the Church and there are many saints in this world who are ordinary working people. And holiness is asked of all generations and age groups. And it is not true that the righteous ones come from among the elderly, since holiness is not bound by age and God’s intervention is possible in the hearts of people of all ages according to the degree of one’s obedience to God’s commandments since God desires all people to exert the effort of seeking Him and all people of any age can follow after Purity.

Holiness is not a “dispassion” or in being above human weaknesses and falls, but it is in rising after every fall. But what is important is that one should not yield to his passions and base desires and to believe that the rising of the soul from sin is ever possible. We know that our Holy Fathers suffered many temptations and that the glory they had and the “risings” were not indelible as if taking place in an unbreakable linear sequence; they had their falls and their comebacks or risings. What is important is that the believer knows the grammar of rising and make sure to repent with all his heart and to determine to receive the Lord in his heart after every temptation that befalls him. One is not to make peace with a sin he fell into; he is to hate it with all his heart. Moreover, he has to love intimacy with the Lord and living with Him. “How sweet is coming back to God” someone said. It is important that one finds his joy in Christ and to feel torn inside when he sins. The aim here is that one should seek to be a Paschal Person where there is no place for pleasure with evil and to hate sin in every other person so that we all can exit to the Resurrection since the Resurrection is Freedom.

And where there is freedom there God’s Spirit is; and we become one spirit with Him. Then there is no place for our serfdom to evil. It is not true that Man is primarily inclined to evil. There are those who love the good and overcome the base inclinations in them. There are those who sparkle with the divine love and make it their ongoing baptism no matter how much it costs them to stay righteous. This is so because righteousness is costly and putting it on as a mantle is a great consolation. With holiness, even though our feet touch this earth, but we are really bound to Heaven. And our head reaches its thresholds every day until the day when the Kingdom carries us off with joy that surpasses this world.

The Lord does not prevent us from enjoying appropriately the joys of this world, but He does not want them to have a hold on our hearts. He is adamant to be the sole inhabitant of the human heart. As such we use what is in the world but we do not let the world use us. We master what we have because whoever has God as his Lord is the master of all things. And the spirit of this world is understood to be that of money which Jesus warned us not to worship because God is one and He does not accept partnership with Him. We enjoy marriage, and the wife is a sister and a companion and she also is a partner in the love of the Lord. The enjoyments we have can be used to bring us closer to the Lord. God is the ultimate object of our love; and having a body we are not angels, but we have to seek to be like God and be deified through His grace.

Thus we become one with all the Saints who are in Heaven and on Earth. We have a heart to heart dialogue with them and so our joy is full in them. That is what we call the communion of saints. And the Saints are God's kin and so we are saved from agony though we are afflicted with sickness and ordeals. And this is the cross without which no one can attain to the resurrection and itself (the cross) is the beginning of the resurrection in this world. Christ is the center of our existence whether we are in good health or in bad health, or whether we are cultured or uncultured. When the heart is illumined with the Holy Spirit, the mind will have peace from God, the peace that dispels complexes, confusion and doubt; with that one has what Paul calls 'the mind of Christ'.

And with that mind we dismiss every contradictory idea and we understand existence the way God sees it. With that we become of Christ's flesh and bones and the intimate companions of God. With that understanding according to our Tradition, each of the 'holy ones' becomes himself a Christ. The mind then is 'christened' and also the heart and we become beings of light, from whom earthliness has been swept away; at the end, we become mere light and God sees us through His light. And on the last day, due to the illumining of people, the material world becomes light as Maximus the Confessor says, and our light meets the light of the world and the whole universe becomes light; there God dwells.

That is the holiness which we know from the Divine books and the Tradition of the Pure. And God insists that we put on the Light as He does. We are grateful to Him for this gift of Light and we cannot be satisfied with anything less because no desire remains in us except for it.