

Pope Shenouda III series

5

***THE FEAST
OF
THE ANNUNCIATION***

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AND OF THE APOSTOLIC SEE OF
ALL THE PREDICATION OF SAINT MARK***

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Predication of the Evangelist St. Mark*

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*In the Name of
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
the One God,
Amen.*

You will read in this pamphlet about the Annunciation of the Nativity of Christ, glory be to Him, and the annunciations which preceded and succeeded it. It is the annunciation of salvation for the world. It is the first feast of the Lord. It is an annunciation of love, because the reason of the Incarnation and Redemption is the love of God for the world. The Lord Christ has offered to us rejoicing annunciations and has presented God to us as a loving Father.

What shall we then announce to people? Let there be in your mouths, all of you, a rejoicing annunciation for everybody.

Pope Shenouda III

The feast of the Annunciation comes every year on the 29th of Baramhat. There is between it and the Feast of the Nativity which comes on the 29th of Kiahk, a period of nine months that constitutes the period of the holy pregnancy with the Lord Christ.

The Annunciation

Thus the feast of the Annunciation is the first among the Lord feasts.

We remember in it the Annunciation of the archangel Gabriel to the Holy Virgin saying to her:

"Hail to you, you full of grace, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women! And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest, and the Lord God will give Him the throne of his father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end" (Luke 1: 26-33).

When the Virgin was astonished saying: "How can this be, since I do not know a man?", the angel replied: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1: 34-35).

The angel announced to her about the conception of Elisabeth while she was an old woman. Then he said: "For with God nothing will be impossible" (Luke 1:37).

The Virgin received this annunciation, or this assignment, with submission to the divine will and said: "Behold the maid-servant of the Lord! Let it be according to your word. And the angel departed from her" (Luke 1: 38-39)..... having accomplished his mission.

Other annunciations

There were other annunciations before and after The Annunciation:

There was before it, the annunciation of the angel to the priest Zacharias with the birth of his son John the Baptist.

That one who will be the angel who prepares the way before the Lord Christ (Mark 1:2); and about whom there was the prophecy of the prophet Malachi (Mal. 3:1).

The angel of the Lord "appeared to him, standing on the right side of the altar of incense", and announced to him saying:

"...and your wife Elisabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will

rejoice at his birth. For he will be great in the sight of the Lord and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah....."(Luke 1:8:17).

The Annunciation of the angel to the Virgin was followed by another annunciation to Joseph the Carpenter.

"an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying: "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to yo Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins" (Matt. 1:20-21). And he reminded him of the prophecy of the prophet Isaiah: "Behold the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel" (Isaiah 7:14).

When the Lord Christ was born, another annunciation was sent to the shepherds and to all the people:

An angel of the Lord appeared to "shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night..... and the glory of the Lord shone around them Then the angel said to them: "I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men" (Luke 2: 8-14).

The Annunciation is joy

An annunciation always brings rejoicing news.

Therefore the Gospel is called "besharah" (in Arabic, meaning annunciation). We say "the besharah" of Matthew, the "besharah" of Mark.... because the Gospel brings rejoicing news, Good News, news about the Salvation which the Lord Christ offered in view of our Redemption; and also because the Gospel brings us rejoicing news about the beautiful instructions of Christ, that rejoices every heart who loves virtue and holiness; since spiritual people rejoice with the word of God as if they have found great riches (Ps. 119).

The feast of the Annunciation brings an annunciation of Salvation.

That is clear from the words of the angel: "and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). The word "Jesus" means saviour.

Therefore also, the angel said to the shepherds: "For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11).

The Holy Virgin sang in her encounter with saint Elisabeth, with this song saying: "And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Saviour" (Luke 1:47).

This Annunciation of Salvation was neither only for the Saint Virgin, nor only for the shepherds, but for all the world.

Therefore the angel said to the shepherds: "I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2: 10-11).

It is about this salvation which is for all, that the old man Simeon, when he took the child Jesus up in his arms, blessed God and said: "Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation which You have prepared before the face of all peoples" (Luke 2:29-31).

The good news of salvation is then for everybody and for all peoples. It arrived first to the ears of our mother the Holy Virgin Mary, then to the others.

The beginning of reconciliation

The annunciation of the birth of the Lord Christ was the beginning of the reconciliation between heaven and earth:

The beginning of the reconciliation between God and men, after a long dissension since Adam and Eve..... The way to the tree of life was closed, and was guarded by the cherubim with a flaming sword (Gen. 3:24). The Holiest of All was behind the veil, and nobody from the people could enter it (Heb. 9: 3,7).

In the previous period to the coming of the Lord Christ, there were neither prophets, nor talking between God and men, nor holy visions, nor angels whom God sent to men..... It was a long period during which human beings were alienated from God.

Then came the Annunciation as a prelude of reconciliation between God and men.

The visions of angels multiplied, accompanied by rejoicing epistles that were the Annunciation of the Saviour.....

It was an annunciation of a spiritual salvation.

An annunciation of a Saviour who will save men from their sins, and not a political saviour who would save from the dominion of Romans.

It was rather a salvation "by the remission of their sins" (Luke 1:77). As the priest Zacharias prophesied saying about this salvation "Through the tender mercy of our God to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death" (Luke 1: 78:79).

Salvation was to be completed upon the Cross, when Christ carried our sins and died for them. But the salvation upon the Cross would not

have been completed unless if first Christ were born. Here was the importance of the Annunciation of the Nativity of Christ who will deliver his people from their sins, and the annunciation of the salvation from the dominion of Satan, and the annunciation of the salvation from the judgement of death, and from the dissension which was between God and men.....

The road to salvation then, began with the Annunciation.

The old man Simeon saw it in the Nativity of Christ, and said to the Lord: "For my eyes have seen Your Salvation" (Luke 2:30); that is the procession of the salvation, and the procession of the journey from the Nativity to Golgotha. He saw them with the spirit of prophecy.....

An annunciation brought by angels

It was the archangel Gabriel who has brought the Annunciation to the Holy Virgin, in view of the dignity of the Saint Mother of God. The annunciation to Joseph the Carpenter, was in a dream where the angel of God appeared to him and brought him the good news. The annunciation of the birth of John the Baptist was on the right side of the altar of incense, as it is becoming to Zacharias the priest.....

The annunciation to Joseph was after the holy conception. But the annunciation to the Holy Virgin was before that. Why then?

It was not convenient that the Virgin would find herself pregnant, without her knowledge of anything about the matter, lest she would fall into a great terror that would also affect her blood and her morale! But the convenient matter was rather that she would first know the divine mystery, and be psychologically prepared in a restful manner.... and also it was necessary that she would be annunciated firstly, in order that she would give her acceptance to offer herself as a mother in the mystery of the divine Incarnation. God did not compel her to that.

When the Virgin responded to the divine will with the expression: "Let it be to me according to your word", then began the holy pregnancy.

But it was not convenient that Joseph the Carpenter would have been annunciated before the Virgin, and before taking her acceptance, and also because of the importance of the Holy Virgin.

Let it be to me according to your word

In the story of the Annunciation, we remember two things: the divine choice, and the human response.

The choice by God of the Virgin, and her response with her words: "Let it be to me according to your word".....

The reason of the choice by God, is His knowledge of the holiness of the Virgin, and her tolerance of this magnificent glory: the Virgin who was bred up in the temple since her childhood, in the life of prayer and

meditation, and in her reading of the Holy Bible, and her study of many of the versets, the pure Virgin who loved virginity.

And also the humble Virgin who can bear that magnificent glory without her heart being raised up.

It would not be not an easy matter for a girl to become the mother of God, if she was not very humble-hearted. Bearing dignity is not an easy matter, as saint Abba Antonius said: "Bearing dignity is more difficult than bearing outrage". But a humble heart can bear dignity. Therefore God waited till He found that humble pure heart, in order to annunciate to her with the divine Incarnation.

The Holy Virgin said thus in her song: "my soul has rejoiced in God my Saviour, for He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant" (Luke 1: 47-48). The expression "maidservant" and not "mother", is also a proof of her humility, specially after she had heard saint Elisabeth say to her: "But why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (Luke 1:43).

The will of God united with the will of the Virgin, by the expression: "let it be to me according to your word". And the holy pregnancy began by this expression.

Thus the Holy Spirit came upon her, and sanctified her womb, so that the Holy One that is born of her, would not inherit anything from the original sin.

By the expression: "let it be to me according to your word", the Logos or the Second Person came into the Holy Virgin's womb, and united personally to a body whom the Holy Spirit made in her, in order to grow with a natural growth until His birth is completed.

In this manner, the humble Word, "who made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant" (Philippians 2:7), came into the womb of the humble Virgin.

It was becoming of the humble Son, to be borne of a humble mother.

Because without humility, the completion of the divine Incarnation was not possible. And without humility, Crucifixion and Redemption could not have been possible.

There is another important lesson which we take from the expression: "let it be to me according to your word":

With the expression: "let it be to me according to your word", the Virgin proved the life of abandon:

The Holy Virgin who had loved the life of virginity, since she did "not know a man", (Luke 1:34), did not at anytime think that she would become a mother, and that was something wonderful in her eyes. But when the angel annunciated to her the divine will, she could not but abandon herself to the will of God, and she said: "let it be to me according to your word".

Thus in the feast of the Annunciation, we learn a lesson about the life of abandon.

In the story of the Annunciation, we see the awe of the angel of God.

The expression: "do not be afraid" is evidently apparent.

It was said in the annunciation of the angel to the priest Zacharias: "And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elisabeth will bear you a son" (Luke 1: 12-13).

And in the annunciation of the angel to the Virgin, it was said: "But when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and considered what manner of greeting this was. Then the angel said to her: "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God" (Luke 1: 29-30).

In the story of the Annunciation also, we see the respect of the archangel Mikhail for the Holy Virgin.

When he appeared to her, he said: "Hail to you, O full of grace, the Lord is with you, blessed are you among women" (Luke 1:28).

This encounter is different from the apparition of the angel to the priest Zacharias, and the apparition of the angel to Joseph in a dream. In the two apparitions, there were no salutation, and no praise, as in the apparition to the Virgin.

We remark that the expression: "blessed are you among women" which the angel said to the Virgin, was told to her also by saint Elisabeth in her encounter with her (Luke 1:42).

We note that the astonishment of Zacharias from having a son, was met by the angel Gabriel with a punishment (Luke 1:20), while the astonishment of the Virgin, was met by an explanation and a clarification.

It is on the one side, because of the dignity of the Virgin, and also because the virginal birth was the first of its kind and had no precedent. But the birth from sterile women and from the wives of old men, happened before, as in the birth of Isaac from the old Abraham and his wife Sara (Gen. 18:11-12). When Sara was astonished to give birth in her old age, the Lord did not punish her, because there was no precedent to this in that time.

Anyway, the angel replied saying: "For with God nothing will be impossible" (Luke 1:37). May we also take a lesson from this expression of the angel, a lesson that will bring hope in our hearts, whatever matters seem difficult or impossible before us!..... The Lord Christ also said this spiritual and theological principle later on: "With men it is impossible; but not with God; for with God all things are possible" (Mark 10:27).

In the story of the Annunciation, we rejoice that it was an angel who brought the Annunciation.

The prophet Elisha brought the annunciation to the shunamite woman that she will have a son, saying: "About this time next year you will embrace a son" (2 Kings 4:16). And this happened. But here, it is an angel who brings the annunciation, rather an archangel, because of the majesty of the born

The angel said to the Virgin about her son: "He will be great" (Luke 1:32).

He said also: "and will be called the Son of the Highest" (Luke 1:32). He also said to her: "that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35). He said this before Nataniel testified this sonship (John 1:49), and before Peter (Matt. 16:16).

The angel in his annunciation to the Virgin, testified that her Son will be a King, "and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end" (Luke 1:33). That resembles also the prophecy of the prophet Daniel, when he said: "Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and His kingdom the one which shall not be destroyed" (Dan. 7:14).

The feast of the Annunciation gives us an idea about feasts during the period of fasting.

It comes always during Lent, because the month of Baramhat is always during Lent. We do not break Lent for any reason. Therefore we celebrate the feast of the Annunciation while we are fasting our vegetal fast, although we are exempted from fasting without any food or drink, in celebration of this feast of the Lord. Also there are no "metanoyas" (that means kneeling down and touching the ground with one's forehead).

The Annunciation of Salvation

It is the feast not simply of the Annunciation of the Nativity, but the Annunciation of the beginning of salvation.

We bring the good news to people that God had begun the execution of His divine plan for the salvation of the human race; beginning with the operation of the Incarnation by the holy pregnancy, which leads to Nativity, and then to the Cross, and the Redemption, then the Resurrection and the destruction of the judgement of death.

In the feast of the Annunciation, we bring the good news to everybody, that his salvation is near, and that God has decreed to save.

As He said when He granted salvation to the chief tax collector Zaccheus: "Today salvation has come to this house, because he also is a son of Abraham; for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19: 9-10). He who saved the tax collector Zaccheus in spite of all his iniquities, He is able to save any sinner. And

He who came to save those who have perished, He also is ready to save those who have fallen.....

How beautiful is it that we present the annunciation of salvation to every one who is under a yoke.

We say to those who are tired and under heavy charges, here is the Lord who says: "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28).

And we say to those have broken hearts: The Lord has come for you and for your rest and for your delivery. Is He not the One who said: "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon Me, because the Lord has anointed Me to preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound" (Isaiah 61:1). With this, we plant hope and joy in the hearts of people. Verily how true is the word of the Bible:

"How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, who bring glad tidings of good things!" (Rom. 10:15).

The Bible says also: "a good report makes the bones healthy" (Prov. 15:30).

Let then be in your mouths a good word that rejoices people, and good news that fills their hearts with hope..... Say to the sinner that repentance is easy, and that the grace of God is capable of facilitating for you the way of repentance; and God looks for you, and He will inevitably find you and bring you back to Him. Therefore your salvation from sin is possible and easy. And as the apostle saint Paul said: "now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed" (Rom. 13:11). The Lord is ready to accept us to Him whatever we have gone astray far from Him, as He previously accepted the lost son (Luke 15), and as He accepted the apostle Peter (John 21) although he had precedently denied Him, and swore and cursed and said: "I do not know the Man" (Matt. 26:74).

Rejoicing declarations by the Lord Christ

How numerous are the rejoicing declarations which the Lord God presented to individuals or to the whole world. Among them:

A rejoicing declaration in the expression: "your sins are forgiven you".

He said this expression to the paralytic whom his friends had let down on a bed from the uncovered roof (Mark 2:5). All what this paralytic hoped for was to obtain the healing of his body. But the Lord granted him also the annunciation of forgiving his sins..... The Lord said the same expression to the woman sinner who had anointed His feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair in the house of Simeon the leper. He annunciated to her also the forgiveness of her sins, because she had loved

much, and He said to her: "your sins are forgiven you" (Luke 7:48). And also: "Your faith has saved you" (Luke 7:50).

The most beautiful annunciations are the proclamations of forgiveness, and they are many in the mouth of the Lord Christ.

Even when He was upon the Cross, He said this declaration: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do" (Luke 23:34). He brought the same beautiful annunciation to the right thief, comforting him by his word: "today you will be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43). It is the most beautiful expression which the thief heard during all his life, and he heard it on the last day of his life.

How beautiful also is the word of the Lord to the woman who was caught in the very act: "Neither do I condemn you, go and sin no more" (John 8:11).

The apostle Peter was very sad because he had denied the Lord three times. "So he went out and wept bitterly" (Matt. 26:75). Then after the Resurrection, he heard from the Lord this rejoicing annunciation: "Feed my lambs tend my sheep" (John 21: 15-16).

Truthfully, an annunciation will bring more joy if it is not expected, or if it is more generously announced.

Before the crucifixion, the Lord presented many rejoicing annunciations to his disciples.

He said to them: "I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you" (John 14:18), "Therefore you now have sorrow, but I will see you again and your heart will rejoice, and your joy no one will take from you" (John 16:22). He announced to them that He will rise from death and that they will see Him; and He announced to them another beautiful annunciation which is: "I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also" (John 14: 2-3). What is more beautiful than this annunciation.

He made to them another annunciation about the coming of the Holy Spirit upon them.

The annunciation of the Holy Spirit

by rejoicing words saying: "And I will pray the Father; and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever, the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you" (John 14:16-17). And also: "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you" (John 14:26), "However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth, and He will tell you things to come" (John 13:16).

The talk about the coming of the Holy Spirit upon them, was a rejoicing annunciation, revealing the power which they will obtain, and revealing the beginning of their service and their predication. Therefore He said to them before the Ascension: "you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

May we, all of us, announce to people the action of the Holy Spirit in them.

We announce to them the participation of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 13-14); and that they will all be, the "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). Obviously partakers in the action, the Holy Spirit acting in us, and acting by us and with us. As the apostle saint Paul said about himself and about Apollos, his associate in the service: "For we are God's fellow workers" (1 Cor. 3:9). And as we pray in the prayer of the travellers, saying to God: "Participate in the work with your servants, in every good deed"

Yes, we announce to people that they have become the temples of the Holy Spirit.

That would be after they had obtained the holy anointment in the holy sacrament of Confirmation (1 John 2: 20,27), and the Holy Spirit has taken His abode in them. Thus would be realised the annunciation which the apostle saint Paul said to us: "Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?" (1 Cor. 3:16), "Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own?" (1 Cor. 6:19).

Other annunciations

Among the deepest and the most influential annunciations, there is the word of the Lord:

"and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age"
(***Matt. 28:20***).

It is a good and rejoicing annunciation that the Lord will be always with us, and that we are not alone. He says rather: "For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them" (Matt. 18:20). Also his word: "Peace I leave to you, My peace I give to you Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid" (John 14:27).

Let us not forget also the annunciation of the divine protection:

He says: "But the very hairs of your head are all numbered" (Matt. 10:30)., and his word: "But not a hair of your head shall be lost" (Luke 21:18). The apostle saint Paul remembered this annunciation and

said to his men announcing them and saying: "since not a hair will fall from the head of any of you" (Acts 27 34).

About this guard also, the Gospel presented to us another annunciation in the word of the Lord God: "Behold, I give you the authority to trample on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall by any means hurt you" (Luke 10:19). And his word to the apostle saint Paul: "Do not be afraid for I am with you, and no one will attack you to hurt you" (Acts 18: 9-10).

An annunciation concerning eternity

How wonderful are the annunciations which the Lord presents about the happy eternity. The Lord presents them to the triumphant, those who have fought in their spiritual life and were victorious.

He says:

"To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God"

"He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death"

"To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat"

"And he who overcomes, and keeps My works until the end, to him I will give power over the nations"

"and I will give him the morning star"

(Apocalypse, Revelation 2: 7,11,17,26,28).

And He completes this rejoicing annunciation saying:

"He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life, but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels".

"He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God."

Rather how wonderful is the annunciation in which He says:

"To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with my Father on His throne".

(Apocalypse, Revelation 3: 5,12,21).

The Lord presents to us another annunciation about eternity in the description of the heavenly Jerusalem

where God will abide with His people in this city "coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for his husband"..... "there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away" (Apoc. 21:2-4).

"The city had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God illuminated it" (Apoc. 21:23).

"There shall be no night there: They need no lamp nor light of the sun, for the Lord God gives them light. And they shall reign forever and ever" (Apoc. 22:5).

"They shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads" (Apoc. 22:4).

There will be the tree of life, and the water of life.

There is the annunciation of the frequentation of the angels and of the saints. From the best which has been said about the annunciation of eternity, there is the word of the apostle:

"Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him" (1 Cor. 2:9).

A marvelous annunciation about life in eternity. It exceeds all imagination, and brings joy, and incites to spiritual exertion, and to join the Lord in order to enjoy this annunciation. The apostle adds another annunciation to it, where he says that we shall rise with spiritual bodies, heavenly bodies. We shall be risen in power and in glory. "For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality" (1 Cor. 15:53).

The apostle adds another annunciation, and says: "Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words" (1 Thess. 4: 17-18).

Truthfully, how sweet and beautiful is it to meditate upon this annunciation concerning eternity.....

An annunciation concerning God

In Christianity, there are many beautiful, deep and moving matters which we can annunciate to people. But the most beautiful in them, is God Himself and His relationship with human beings.

God loves human beings. He is The benefactor and controls everything. He is "fairer than the sons of men" (Ps. 45:2). He has beautifully done everything. In His love for us, He has created us to His image and His resemblance, and granted us power over all His creatures on earth (Gen. 1: 26-28). When we sinned against Him, because of the excellence of His love to us, He redeemed us and facilitated for us the way of repentance. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).

The annunciation of forgiveness and redemption is among the most beautiful matters which Christianity annunciates.

God of whom the psalmist said: "He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor punished us according to our iniquities. For as the

heavens are high above the earth, so great is His mercy toward those who fear Him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us. As a father pities his children, so the Lord pities those who fear Him. For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust" (Psalm 103: 10-14).

He is the merciful forgiving good God

who says in spite of our disobeying his commandments: "For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more" (Jer. 31:34); "Do I have pleasure at all that the wicked should die?.....and not that he should turn from his ways and live?!" "None of the transgressions which he has committed shall be remembered against him; because of the righteousness which he has done, he shall live." (Ez. 18: 23-22). He is God who has reconciled the world to Himself "not imputing their trespasses to them" (2 Cor. 5:19).

When the prophet David meditated upon the beautiful qualities of God, he said in his psalm:

***"O Lord God of hosts, who is mighty like You, O Lord? (Ps 89:8),
"O God, who is like You? (Ps. 71:19).***

"who in the heavens can be compared to the Lord?" (Ps. 89:6). "Among the gods there is none like You, O Lord" (Ps. 86:8), "For the Lord is great and greatly to be praised; He is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the peoples are idols" (Ps. 96:4-5).

God gives us without our asking, and gives us more than we ask for. He gives food to the birds of the sky, He gives beauty to the lilies of the field which Solomon in all his glory had not (Matt. 6: 26-29).

Let us announce to people that God is the Shepherd who carries us joyfully upon his shoulders (Luke 15:5).

He is the shepherd about whom the prophet David said: "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake" (Psalm 23). He is also the good shepherd who "gives His life for the sheep" (John 10:11)..... Yes, He is the good shepherd who searches for us when we go astray, and does not rest till He finds us. (Luke 15).

We announce to people that God is God the Safekeeper, the Deliverer, the Rescuer.....

He is the One who will not forget us, even if the mother forgets her nursing child (Is. 49:15). He has said: "I will not leave you, nor forsake you" (Joshua 1:5). He cares for us whatever we go astray. He is the God of all, even the weak, the small, the despised, and that are not (1 Cor. 1:28). He is the One sitting in the high places, looking at humble people. He is the One who forgives our sins, and delivers our life from corruption; as we say in the divine mass. He is the One to whom we say

in the Lord Prayer: "do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one" (Matt. 6:13).

An annunciation of love

Let a rejoicing word be in the mouths of everyone of you, to say it to people, let everyone of you bring to them a good annunciation.

Carry a good word to every one who is in tribulation or who has a problem; a word of good wishes, or a word of profitable counsel. Say to everybody that there is a key to every closed door, there are, may be, rather many keys and that God has a solution to every problem, rather many solutions. Say if God wills, that problem will be solved. If God wills, that tribulation will end. Remind people with the word of the Bible:

"all things work together for good to those who love God"
(Rom. 28:8).

Let not your features be morose, do not give people a frightening thought about God, a black thought about religion which you do not mention unless accompanied with weeping and tears! so that all those who see you say: "O Lord, cover"! and see nothing but a band on which it is written: "by a sad countenance the heart is made better" (Eccl. 7:3)..... The sad countenance will be while you are giving account to yourself about your sins in your sleeping place, and not constantly before people!

Let cheerfulness be one of your beloved qualities that draws people to religion.

Your cheerfulness is a rejoicing annunciation which makes people feel that religion brings peace into the heart, and reminds them of the word of the apostle saint Paul: "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice!" (Philippians 4:4).

The work of the Lord Christ was not only the salvation which he offered on the Cross. But He brought joy to everybody whom He met. That appears from the word of the Bible about Him:

"who went about doing good" (Acts 10:38).

He distributed good things to people. All those who met Him obtained good things from Him. Is He not the One who said: "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). You also, let this style which is of the Lord Christ, be your style.

If you cannot present good in action, present it in words as a good annunciation.

So that people will be optimistic when they see you, as the prophet David said about Ahimaaz the son of Zadok: "He is a good man, and comes with good news" (2 Sam. 18:27). Therefore do not complicate matters before anybody, whatever bad is his condition..... But rather in

the midst of darkness, open for him a window of light, a window of hope, and beware of causing despair to anybody, or of bringing affliction to his soul.....

Let your soul be a relaxing soul so that anyone who hears you gets rest.

Relaxed souls can rest others. People always lean to them in order to have rest..... not with words of flattery or simply to please, but with spirit and truth, and with a beautiful instruction from the Bible and from the lives of saints. Contrarily to other souls who complicate matters; he who sits with them, goes out repeating the psalm: "Many are they who say to me: There is no help for him in God" (Ps. 3:2). They are like the friends of the just Job to whom he said; "Miserable comforters are you all!" (Job 16:2).

Features which are simply relaxed, give rest to people.

Likewise the photographer asks people to smile before taking their pictures, so that their features may be relaxed and acceptable. Likewise when you see a smiling child, from whose face light expands, you rejoice and smile also yourself..... A person when he sees the features of his chief dejected, runs away from meeting him and does not expect good. But if he meets him cheerfully or with a smile, he sees that his cheerfulness brings a good annunciation.

Let everyone who sees you be optimistic and expecting good, and be happy that he begins his day with your cheerful faces.

Even without your saying to them good news.... But their simple encounter with you, will be by itself a rejoicing annunciation. Say to people that God created man to be happy; and when He created him, He put him in Paradise. Then, O Lord, let it be to us according to your word.

The heart which is full of hope, has always a good annunciation inside.

He simultaneously transfers the hope which is in his heart to people; and the joy which is in his heart and which appears at the same time in his features, is conveyed to others. How beautiful is what a saint father said to the saint Amba Antonius: "It is enough for me simply to look at your face, O father"....

Even amidst tribulations, the fathers did not lose their joy. In this respect, the apostle saint Paul said about himself and about his associates in the service: "as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things" (2 Cor. 6:10).

The word of the Lord: "If you can believe, all things are possible to him who believes", in a rejoicing annunciation.

Thus the apostle Paul said: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13). The rejoicing annunciation which you bring to the sinner, is not for him to think lightly of his condition, but that you

say to him that God is able to save him from his sin; and that he has to begin with repentance, and grace will help him.....

In the first fall of man, and while God was punishing him, He presented a rejoicing annunciation to him.

He said to him that the seed of woman shall bruise the head of the serpent (Gen. 3:15). That is wonderful: a promise of salvation at the same moment of reproof. Thus the Lord Christ came from the posterity of the woman, "born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law" (Gal. 4:4-5), and bruise the head of the serpent.

Yes, that is the rejoicing annunciation of the Nativity: "For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11).

*Pope Shenouda III series
of booklets
9*

*Some Questions about
The Nativity*

Third print, Cairo 1999

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His Holiness Pope Shenouda III
Pope and Patriarch of the See of Alexandria and of all the
Predication of the Evangelist St. Mark

(COVER PAGE)

***In the Name of
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
the One God,
Amen.***

In this booklet we present to you some answers which are related to certain questions about the Nativity, of which there are:

The sequence of the genealogy, and the mention of some sinful women in it; and the difference between the two gospels of Matthew and Luke as regards the names, and as regards the ascending order and the descending order in that sequence.

The number of genealogies, is it 41 or 42?

Elizabeth your relative.

The son of David the son of Abraham.

The difference in the celebration of the day of the Nativity.

The wise men (the Magi) and the nature of the star of the wise men.

The difference between the (Magi) wise men and the shepherds.

Pope Shenouda III

PREFACE

Some people ask many questions about the subject of The Nativity of Christ, and they need answers. I undertook to answer from the sayings of the Saint Fathers, which I had translated, or which I had taken from some manuscripts.

I relied in that, on many books, the most important of which are:

1. Saint John Chrysostom's interpretation of Matthews' gospel (manuscript, and translation).

2. The Homelies of saint Severus of Antioch, which were published in "Patrologia Orientalis: Homilae Cathedrales"

3. The sermons of saint John Chrysostom.

There are other questions about the virginal nativity and the virginity of the Holy Virgin, to which I answered in our book "The Comparative Theology", to which it can be referred.

But now, I congratulate you for the Nativity of the Lord Christ.

Many happy returns.

1

The sinful women in the genealogy sequence

QUESTION

Why did the evangelist neglect the names of some saint women like Sara, Rebecca, and others, in the sequence of genealogies, while he mentioned adulterous women like Tamar, Rahab, the wife of Uriah the Hittite, and Ruth who is a woman of a foreign race?

ANSWER

He wanted to annihilate the haughtiness of the Jews who boast about their grandfathers. He showed to them how their grandfathers had sinned. Judah committed adultery with Tamar, his son's widow, and engendered Perez and Zerah from her. David fell into adultery with the wife of Uriah the Hittite. Boaz, the great grandfather of David, was engendered by Salmon from the adulteress Rahab.

Even if their grandfathers were virtuous men, the virtue of their grandfathers would not have been profitable to them; because the deeds of a person, not the deeds of his sons, are those which determine his destiny at the last day.

Saint John Chrysostom said about that: "

"The Lord Christ did not come to run away from our disgraceful actions, but to obliterate them. He is not ashamed of any of our defects. And just as those grandfathers had taken adulterous women, in the same way our Lord and God has betrothed for Himself our nature that had committed adultery.

The Church is like Tamar:

She was at once delivered from her wicked actions, and then she followed Him.

The condition of Ruth resembles our conditions:

Her tribe was a foreigner to Israel; and it went down to exceeding poverty. Nevertheless, when Boaz saw her, he did not despise her poverty, neither did he reject the vileness of her race. In the same way, the Lord Christ did not reject His Church that was an alien, and poor as regards good deeds. And just as Ruth, if she had not left her people and her house, she would not have tasted that glory, in the same way, the Church about which the prophet said: "Forget your own people also, and your father's house; so the King will greatly desire your beauty" (Psalm 45: 10-11).....

Our Lord mortified them with these matters, and made them realize how not to be haughty.

When the evangelist registered the genealogy of Christ, he mentioned those sinful women; because it is impossible for any of us to be virtuous by the virtue of his grandfathers, or to be wicked by the vice of his grandfathers. I rather say that the person whose grandfathers were not virtuous and became virtuous himself, then the honor of that person's virtue would have been great.

Let no one boast about his grandfathers, and be puffed because of them, when he thinks about the grandfathers of our Lord; and let him look at his own deeds, and even let him not boast about his virtues; because it is through such boasting that the Pharisee became less the the Publican. (Luke 18).

Do not then falsify your pains by vain talk. Do not loose all your effort after having covered a long distance; because your Lord knows the virtues which you have attained, better than you, because if you give a glass of cold water, God will not neglect that, and will not forget it. (Matt. 10:43).

2

Ascent & descent in the genealogical sequence

QUESTION

There are three differences in the sequence of genealogy, between what the evangelist Matthew registered, and what the evangelist Luke registered. They are:

1. *There is a difference between the names in the two gospels.*
 2. *Saint Matthew begins the biography of the Lord Christ with the genealogical sequence. As for saint Luke, he does not speak of it before telling the story of the baptism.*
 3. *Saint Matthew mentions the genealogy descending from the first fathers to the sons, while saint Luke mentions the genealogy ascending from the Lord Christ to Adam to God.*
- Is there an interpretation for all these differences?*

ANSWER

I. The difference in names.

As a matter of fact, saint Matthew mentions the natural genealogy of the Lord Christ, while saint Luke mentions the legal or official genealogy. To explain this, we say:

The law of Moses specifies that if a man dies without posterity, the brother of the dead man must take the widow of his brother, and marry her, and engender a posterity for his brother from her. (Deut. 25: 5-6), or that the son whom he engenders becomes from the legal point of view, an official son to his brother, although he is considered a natural son to that brother who has engendered him.

Hence such a son would have two fathers: a natural father who has engendered him, and a legal father who is his uncle who died without posterity.

If this dead man without posterity has no brother, the nearest relative to him will take his wife and engender a posterity to him;

because the son who is born is counted a son to this dead man, according to the law. If the nearest relative does not want to take the wife of the dead man according to what he has been charged of, the next relative must necessarily accept this marriage, because the law is eager to raise a posterity to that dead man who has not engendered a son.

That kind of marriage is called "redemption". A clear example of this is mentioned in the story of Ruth with Boaz.

In his interpretation of this, saint Severus of Antioch said:

In this manner, Joseph the betrothed to the Holy Virgin is related, as a matter of fact, to two fathers :

Because since Heli took a wife and died without posterity, Jacob, who was the nearest relative to him, married his wife in order to engender a posterity to him from her according to the commandment of the law. When he engendered Joseph, that Joseph became a legal son to the dead Heli, and at the same time a natural son to Jacob. Therefore saint Matthew, from his part, said that Joseph is the son of Jacob, and saint

Luke, from the other part, said that he is the son of Heli. One mentioned the natural genealogy, and the other mentioned the legal genealogy.

From his part, saint Matthew mentioned the natural fathers of Joseph, while saint Luke, from the other part, mentioned the legal fathers.

Saint Luke went on with the genealogical legal sequence until Nathan son of David. Saint Matthew went on until Solomon son of David. The two met in David..... Then the course was sometimes similar, and some other times, it was variously divided, then it was united again, and then separated.

Hence the genealogy of Christ is confirmed, from the natural and from the legal point of view,.....that He is the son of David, the son of Abraham, the son of Adam.

2. The difference in ascending and in descending, and the relation between this and the baptism.

Saint Matthew began his gospel by saying: "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the son of Abraham....." Then he explained the genealogy saying: "Abraham begot Isaac, Isaac begot Jacob". And after having mentioned those who were engendered through faulty relations, he came at last to the census of the generations. Then he said directly: "Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows....."

Thus after having explained the corruption and the death through which all these generations had passed, he arrived at the pure birth of the Lord Christ from the Holy Spirit and from the Virgin saint Mary.

As for saint Luke, he narrated the Annunciation, the birth of the Baptist, the Nativity of Christ, and gradually reached the baptism of Christ at the age of thirty; and then he mentioned the legal genealogy.

Saint Severus of Antioch explains this matter saying:

"Luke explained the legal genealogy, that reminds us of Him who died without posterity, then his name was raised after his death, by a son who is attributed to him, in a way that has some similarity to the adoption and to the resurrection.

He mentioned this genealogy after having narrated the story of the Nativity; because baptism gives the true heavenly adoption, in manifesting us as sons of God. Therefore he mentioned the legal genealogy which gives the adoption; in order to show that this representation has been truly confirmed, and that the sickly condition of the people has been returned to health by means of grace.

It is for this reason that he ascended with the genealogy from down upwards, till it arrived to God, in order to show that grace which comes

from baptism raises us up and elevates us to the divine relationship, making us sons to God.

Exactly just as the union of marriage which happened after the disobedience of the commandment by Adam and Eve, and the engendering of sons, which resulted from that, made us descend downwards. And to complete this image he descended with the natural genealogy downwards

Saint Augustine says:

Matthew goes down with the genealogy, pointing to our Lord Jesus Christ who descended to bear our sins. Because in the posterity of Abraham "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:3). Thus he did not begin with Adam.

3

The number of generations

QUESTION

Saint Matthew says: "So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations, from David until the captivity in Babylon are fourteen generations, and from the captivity in Babylon until the Christ are fourteen generations" (Matt. 1:17). But when we count them, we find them to be 41 only. What then is the secret?

ANSWER

The reason is that Jeconiah was counted twice, because he is like the angle stone, an intermediate between two generations, and so he was counted with each of the two.

From David who had sinned, they went down to the captivity to the age of Jeconiah,

And from Jecohiah, they went up to the generation of Christ who has emancipated them.

Jeconiah was in that matter, a symbol of Christ, who was described as "the stone which was rejected by the builders, which has become the chief cornerstone".

4

The son of David, the son of Abraham

QUESTION

Why did the apostle Matthew say in the genealogy sequence: "Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham" (Matt. 1:1); and mentioned David firstly, although Abraham precedes David as regards time?

ANSWER

Saint John Chrysostom said about that:

"He mentioned David firstly, because he was prominent in the mouths of all the people at that time, in view of his dignity, and his majesty, and also because he was more recent in time.

Thus they said: "Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the seed of David and from the town of Bethlehem, where David was?" (John 7:42).

Nobody called Him the son of Abraham, but they called Him the son of David..... because of his kingdom, and because they honoured the kings who reigned after him.

And God said to Solomon: "Nevertheless I will not do it in your days, for the sake of your father David; I will tear it out of the hand of your son" (1 Kings 11:12)."

We note also what the angel said in his annunciation to the Holy Virgin of the birth of Christ:

"He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end" (Luke 1: 32:33).

5

*Elizabeth your relative***QUESTION**

The angel of the Annunciation said to the Holy Virgin : "Now indeed, Elizabeth your relative has also conceived in her old age" (Luke 1:36). How can this be, since the Holy Virgin St. Mary is from the tribe of Judah from the posterity of David, while Elizabeth is from the daughters of Aaron from the tribe of Levi; and the mixing among tribes was forbidden, in order to safeguard the inheritance, lest it would be transferred from one tribe to another?!

ANSWER

It is true that it was said in the book of Numbers:

"So the inheritance of the children of Israel shall not change hands from tribe to tribe, for every one of the children of Israel shall keep the inheritance of the tribe of his fathers. And every daughter who possesses an inheritance in any tribe of the children of Israel shall be the wife of one of the family of her father's tribe, so that the children of Israel each may possess the inheritance of his fathers. Thus no inheritance shall change hands from one tribe to another, but every tribe of the children of Israel shall keep its own inheritance" (Num. 36: 7-9).

Nevertheless there are some who interpret the word "your relative" in a general meaning, or that she is like one from the daughters of Israel, according to the word of the apostle saint Paul:

"For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh, who are Israelites, to whom pertain the adoption, the glory, the covenants....." (Rom. 9: 3-4).

But saint Severus, Patriarch of Antioch, presents another interpretation. He says:

[As a matter of fact, the book of the Exode was written before the commandment that forbids taking a wife from another tribe. Aaron, the first chief priest according to the law, took a wife from the daughters of Judah, "Aaron took to himself Elisheba, daughter of Amminadab, sister of Nahshon, as wife" (Ex. 6:23), and Amminadab is from the posterity of the tribe of Judah.....

Consider the very wise management of the Holy Spirit, who ordained that the wife of Zacharias, the mother of the Baptist and the relative of St. Mary the mother of God, was called Elizabeth. We recollect the past until Elizabeth whom Aaron married, and the union of the two tribes which happened through her medium. The Holy Spirit obviously declares to us that it is through the medium of Elizabeth, that the relationship with the Holy Virgin was established.]

6

Why the registration by genealogy from Joseph?

QUESTION

This question was asked by saint John Chrysostom, and he answered it:

"How is it declared that Christ is from the posterity of David? since he was not born of a man but from a woman only; and the posterity of the Virgin was not counted?..... and what is the objective in that the evangelist mentioned Joseph who was not a cause for the Nativity of Christ?"

ANSWER

It was mentioned in the gospel that "the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary" (Luke 1: 26-27). According to the law, it was not permitted that one could marry from a tribe which is not his own tribe (Num. 36: 7-9).

Since Joseph is from the house of David and from his relatives, it was not possible for him to take Mary as a wife from another tribe than his tribe, and from another ethnic group than his.

If you say: "What is it if he had disobeyed the law in that matter? I reply to you that the gospel testified to him that he was "a just man" (Matt. 1:19).

If you say: Why is it according to the genealogy from Joseph and not from the Virgin?

We say: "It was not a custom among the Jews, to count the genealogy from women. Therefore he was silent about the mention of her grandfathers, and he counted the genealogy of Joseph. If he had counted the genealogy from a virgin, he would have invented an innovation. And

if he had been silent about the genealogy of Joseph, we would not have known the grandfathers of the Holy Virgin.....

Also it was because he did not want to manifest before the time, to the Jews, that Christ was born of a Virgin.....since in that, there is a deliverance of the Virgin from a malignant accusation..... lest the Jews would have lapidated the Virgin with stones.

Since after numerous miracles, they called Him the son of Joseph (Matt. 13:55), how would they have believed before His miracles, that He is the son of a virgin?!

7

THE "WISE MEN" (THE MAGI)

QUESTION

Who are the wise men? Why did the star appear to them? How did they overcome the Jews? Was the star a natural star? Or was it a heavenly power in the form of a star? What are the symbols which the story of the wise men bear, and what are their relationships with the Gentiles and the Jews?

ANSWER

The wise men came from the East, probably from the countries of Persia. They were from the rank of princes, or scientists, or priests. They worshipped the ancient eastern gods, probably the fire; and they may have been among the followers of Zaradesht. They were experts in astronomy and in the stars. Perhaps they had heard from the Jews in the dispersion about a Saviour who will come to deliver them and to become the king of the Jews.

Saint John Chrysostom says:

"[My brothers, we urgently need long watching and many prayers in order to be able to answer these questions, and to know who are those wise men? and where did they come from?

Because Satan suggested to the enemies of the truth to say: "When Christ was born, His star appeared: Is this not a sign which proves that astrology is a true industry? If He was born in this manner, why did He eradicate astrology, fortune-telling, and magic, and did he render the devils to silence?!

Let us then examine what was that star: was it one of the numerous stars? Or was it an alien to them, from another nature than their nature?

Or was it that only the person who looked at it, that thought it was a star? If we know the answer to these questions, we shall know the other matters with greater facility.

That star was not one of the numerous stars; and it is more convenient to say, according to what I think, that it was not a star. But it was one of the invisible powers, and was transformed to that aspect.

The evidence is clear:

Firstly: from the way of its movement: Because there is no star which can possibly move in that manner. If you consider the other stars, you will find that their movement is from West to East. But this star went in its course from the North to the South, because that is the direction from the countries of Persia to Palestine.

Secondly: as regards the time of its appearance: because it did not appear by night, but rather in the daytime when the sun has risen. And this appearance is neither due to the strength of a star, nor to the strength of the moon, nor was it due to all these astral bodies which hide and set down when the sun rays appear. But this star had overcome the sun rays by the abundance of its brilliancy, and was more visible and more glittering than all of them.

Thirdly: this truth becomes obvious from that the star appeared for some time and then disappeared for some other time.

Because it appeared in order to show them the way to Palestine. When they came to Jerusalem, it hid itself. And when they left Herod after he had questioned them, and intended to walk to Bethlehem, the star reappeared to them again. This appearance and disappearance does not happen in the movement of an ordinary star, but it is due to a power which is, above measure, different from others. Because it did not march in a special way. But when it was necessary that they would march, it marched. And when they needed to stop, it stopped, thus controlling all the conditions of their march according to what was convenient for them. It was like the column of clouds in its conduct of the Jewish people.

When they entered Jerusalem, the star was hidden from them, so that having lost their guide, they were compelled to ask the Jews, in order that the matter would become notorious and well-known to everybody..... Thus the appearance and the disappearance brought a determined providence that had a special wisdom.

Fourthly: by its descending downwards:

The meditator must in an obvious manner, necessarily find out another characteristic from the guidance of the wise men by the star. Because it was not possible to show them the way while it was high over them, but it achieved that action by coming downwards. Because while it was high over them, it could not determine precisely a narrow place like a hut where a small baby is lying down. We can know this from the

example of the moon, which appears greater than many stars, and how it appears to all the inhabitants of the world in all its vastness, and everyone thinks that the moon is near to him.

Tell me how would the star have shown them a small place like a hut and a manger, if it had not left this high place, and gone downwards till it stopped over the head of the child.

That is what the evangelist indicated saying: "and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was." (Matt. 2:9).

When the star recognized the Child, it stopped, and its stopping there, while it was descending downwards, is a great testimony.

It had a great influence upon the wise men and guided them to the worship of the Child. They did not worship Him as an ordinary human being. That is obvious from the gifts which they presented to Him, and which are not convenient for a small child in its swaddling clothes.....

Did you see with what arguments, it has been shown that this star was not one of the ordinary stars?.....]

Why did the star appear?

If you ask why did the star appear?

I shall answer you saying that its appearance symbolizes the end of the choice of the Jews; destroying all their arguments of self-sufficiency, and calling all the world to His worship.

Thus He opened the door to the Gentiles from the principle of the coming of the Lord, willing to educate His people through the foreigners. Because if He had sent to them many prophets who explained to them His coming, and nevertheless they did not listen to them, therefore He let the foreigners (the Persians) come from a distant land asking for the vision of the way. Let the Jews learn from the words of the inhabitants of Persia, what they refused to learn from their prophets. If they persist and discuss after that also, they will lose every excuse and every argument.

What have they to say, they who have refused to accept the Christ in spite of His having sent to them the prophets, while the wise men accepted the Lord and worshipped Him, merely because they had seen a single star?

Just as He convicted them with His acceptance by the wise men, He also convicted them with the faith of the pagan inhabitants of Nineveh. Therefore He said to them that "The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgement with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here"

(Matt. 12:41). Likewise He convicted them with the Samaritan woman, and the woman of Canaan, and the queen of the South; because all these have at least believed; but the others, not even at most, did not believe.

Why did He attract the wise men in this manner?

Perhaps someone would ask: "Why did He attract the wise men by means of a star? We answer that it was not possible for such people to listen to a prophet if He had sent to them one of the prophets. And it was not convenient for them that He would have talked to them from above or by sending an angel. Therefore He called them by the means to which they were used, condescending to their great weakness; and He showed them a great and strange star, in order to amaze them by its beautiful aspect, and to lead them by its way of marching.

The apostle saint Paul followed this method, when he mentioned a testimony from the poets (Acts 17:28). He argued with everyone with the style to which he was used (1 Cor. 9: 19-22). With the Jews, God firstly utilized the statutes of sacrifices and purification and the rest of the ordinances and prescriptions by which He began, in view of the dullness of their minds. Then He replaced them, attracting them little by little, until reaching the high philosophy.

He did this with the wise men. He permitted to call them with a star which they saw, in order to render them more discerning and more perceptive than they were. When He led them to the manger, and when they saw the new-born, and became in their spiritualities, better than they were, then He did not let them go back to their countries by means of a star, but He "divinely warned" them "in a dream" (Matt. 2:12).

Why did He manifest Himself to those wise men, and not to others?

Perhaps someone would ask: "How did they reach such a great zeal? Who had incited them to such a long journey from their country?" According to my opinion, what they did was not merely to be guided by a star, but it was God who had awakened their souls; just as He had done with the king Cyrus, when He incited him to build the house of God. (Ezra 1:2).

Perhaps it would be said: "Why did He not unveil this manifestation to all the wise men?"

We answer: Because He was not expecting that all of them would believe Him. But He unveiled the matter to those who were more ready to accept Him. Many nations had perished, but the prophet Jonah was not sent but to the people of Nineveh alone. There were two thieves hanging on crosses, but only one of them was saved.

It is astonishing that these wise men come from distant countries to see the Christ! What good things did they expect?.....Did they come to a king?

Nevertheless they did not see a king, but a child in swaddling clothes. Did they treat Him as a king, considering what would be happening? No, because afterwards He did not surround Himself with any kingly appearance, He did not possess neither horses nor slaves, and He was accompanied only by twelve unknown poor men.

They did not expect him to be a king over them, but a king over an opposing country, which was very distant from their country. ***Undoubtedly they realized the dangers which surrounded them in meeting Him.***

They had seen how king Herod trembled, and how the whole congregation was troubled, when they heard the words of the wise men. So they were heading for a king over a country over which there reigned another king What kinds of deaths were then awaiting for them?! And what did they expect from that king to whom they were directed?

What good thing did they hope to take, when they saw before them a hut, and a manger, and a child in his swaddling clothes, and a poor mother. What then was their aim in worshipping Him and in giving Him presents?

Did they expect good things from Him, when he would become a king in the future? And how could they know that this child would, when he would be grown up, remember what they did, so long as he was in His swaddling clothes?!

How marvelous is the virtue of those who had thrown themselves into many dangers, leaving their country and their people, without any apparent aim but that they obeyed what the Lord had placed in their hearts; then they believed, came, worshipped, and gave presents.

We see the virtue of these wise men, not only in their mere coming, but also in their publicly saying: "we have seen His star in the East, and have come to worship Him" (Matt. 2:2). They did not fear neither the anger nor the exasperation of the king.

Hence, I believe that these wise men became the teachers of their countrymen in their lands.....especially that they had known from the Jews, that this one whose star they had seen, is the one whom the prophets had announced long ages ago.

The shepherds and the wise men are symbols of the Jews and the Gentiles:

Saint Augustin explains this point saying:

The wise men from the Gentiles, were the first to believe in the Lord Christ. It is evident that the first fruit of the belief in Christ, was the belief

of the shepherds. The shepherds came to Him from a near place, and they saw Him on the same day, because the news had come to them by means of angels. But the wise men came to Him from a distant place, and by means of a star. Nevertheless both of them met at the corner stone, "who has made both one" those "who were afar off and ...those who were near" (Eph. 2: 14-17). It was said to the shepherds: "Glory to God in the highest" (Luke 2:14), and the expression: "The heavens declare the glory of God" (Ps. 19:1), was realized with the wise men.

The shepherds came from a near place to see, and the wise men came from a distant place to worship.

Grace reached the shepherds before the wise men, but these last were more humble. This is the humility that rendered the wild olive tree deserving to be grafted into a cultivated olive tree (Rom. 11:17). The Holy Bible glorifies this humility more in the Gentiles, than in the Jews. Examples of this are what has been said about the centurion (Matt. 8: 5-10), and about the woman of Canaan (Matt. 15:28).

The Jews manifested to the Gentiles the Christ whom they did not themselves want to worship.

We note as regards the wise men, that in not returning through the same way, they symbolize the change in life; since those who arrive at Christ, do not return again to their first way.

Saint John Chrysostom says again:

"Let the Jews be ashamed, because they had seen wise men and ignorant people preceding them, while they did not come to Him, not even after these. ***That which had happened at that time was a token of what happened later: that the Gentiles preceded the Jews*** Thus those who were from the land of Persia preceded those who were from Jerusalem. The apostle saint Paul mentioned this meaning when he said to them: "It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles" (Acts 13:46).

The Jews should have worshipped with the wise men, and should have glorified their God, but they trembled and were troubled.

"Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared", desiring to kill the new-born.

Between Herod and the wise men:

Herod did not care for all that had happened. He was not persuaded, neither by the prophecies of the prophets which he had heard, nor by the story of the extraordinary star, nor by the coming of the wise men from distant countries to worship the new-born.

It is clear that he was in a strange position. Whether he had believed the prophecy which had been said, it is evident that he acted contrarily. And whether he had denied it and had not expected that what was said in it would be realized, why then was he afraid and terrified?

Among the matters which demonstrate his lack of understanding, is his delusion that the wise men would prefer him to the new-born whose star they had seen, and for whom they suffered the pains of that long journey!

The astonishing thing is that "he had secretly called the wise men", and said to them: "Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also" (Matt. 2:8).

And we ask him: "If you truthfully say that, why then do you ask the people secretly? And if you want to kill Him, do you think that the wise men had no doubts about you, because of your trouble and your calling them secretly? But when the malignity of a person traps him, he becomes less intelligent than everybody....."

Beware of becoming like Herod who said: "that I may come and worship Him also", while his heart was not sincere to Him, but he wanted to kill Him. Because those who worthlessly take part in the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, resemble Herod.

The wise men, before their sight of the Child, were hammered by tribulations and fears from every part. But after their worship, He filled them with peace, and they became His priests through their worship, because they presented gifts and offerings to Him.....

But perhaps you would ask: "Why did the wise men run away from Herod's face? And why did the Child Jesus run away too?"

We answer that it was not convenient to show His miracles in that early age, lest people would not have felt that He was a human being.....

There is another meaning, which is that we must expect difficulties and pains since the beginning of the way.

Here is Jesus who, while He was still in His swaddling clothes, was chased by Herod, and ran away. And His mother who had not committed any evil, who had not gone away from her house for a long distance at any time, she was alienated and suffered the pains of a long journey.....and Joseph likewise, and also those Persians who secretly departed running away.

That happened so that, when you hear these events, and you become prepared to serve a spiritual service, and then you meet calamities and hardships, you do not tremble a little and do not say: "I should have been crowned because I have accomplished the service of my Lord."

When the wise men had been divinely warned not to return to Herod, they "departed for their own country another way" They did not doubt, but they promptly obeyed, *and they did not think in themselves: "If this Child is greatly powerful, and possesses such wonders, what need have we to run away and to depart secretly!"*

Likewise the just Joseph did not argue with the angel, while doubting.....

And he did not say to him: "You said before, that He will save His people, and behold, He did not save Himself, but we are in need of journeying and running away. What happened to us is the contrary of what He had promised us....."

He did not pronounce any of these expressions, because he was believing. And he did not ask about the time of his return from there, although the angel did not specify it, not even by saying "until I bring you word"

THE DIFFERENCE IN THE FEAST OF THE NATIVITY

QUESTION

Why do we celebrate the feast of the Nativity on the 7th of January, while some other churches celebrate it on the 25th of December. What is the reason for this difference?

ANSWER

It is not a doctrinal or a theological difference, but it is a scientific difference.

It is known that the year is 365 days and a quarter of a day. Therefore a day is added once every four years; and the year is called a leap year.

But in the gregorian western calendar, it has been said that the year is 365 days and a quarter of a day and approximately 11 minutes. This calendar was established about fifteen centuries AD.

If this difference of eleven minutes every year, is multiplied during those centuries since the birth of Christ until now, it will result into a difference of approximately thirteen days which is the difference between the 25th of December and the 7th of January.

We have confidence in our Coptic calendar, because of the great excellence of the Pharaohs in the science of astronomy, and we celebrate

the Nativity on the 29th of Kiahk which corresponds to the 7th of January. There are some other churches who share with us this date.

But the question is not a question of faith and doctrine, nevertheless it can be exploited to impress the simple, when the date is changed.

Pope Shenouda III series

4

The Epiphany
&
St. John The Baptist

***BY HIS HOLINESS AMBA SHENOUDA III,
POPE AND PATRIARCH OF ALEXANDRIA
AND OF THE APOSTOLIC SEE OF
ALL THE PREDICATION OF SAINT MARK***

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MEDITATIONS UPON THE GLORIOUS FEAST OF THE EPIPHANY

The month of January brings to us several feasts: the beginning of the new year, the Nativity, the Circumcision, the Epiphany.

We thank God who gave us the blessing and the efficiency of all these feasts, in our lives.

While we celebrate the glorious feast of the Epiphany, we are glad to stop sometime for meditation:

The feast of Epiphany is the feast of Baptism

This feast is also called the feast of the divine manifestation (the Theophania).

Because the Holy Trinity appeared in it: The Son is baptised, The Father says from heaven: "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased", and The Holy Spirit appears "like of a dove" (Matt. 3: 16-17). Hence the baptism of the Lord Christ shows the creed of the Holy Trinity.

Thus the baptism is always in the Name of the Holy Trinity,

according to the word of the Lord to His disciples before His Ascension: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19). He did not say in the names, because the three are one, as it was mentioned in (1 John 5:7): "For there are three that bear witness in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one".

It is well that the Church has called this feast: "Eed El Ghetass", or the feast of the Immersion, (in Arabic: Eed means feast, and "El Ghetass" means immersion).

Because in it, the Church reminds the people that the Lord Christ was baptized by being immersed, as it was said that after being baptized, "When He has been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water" (Matt. 3:16). The Church also reminds the people that the faithful in the New Testament are being baptized by being immersed, (and not by being sprinkled with water, as it is done in some communities). The Ethiopian eunuch was baptized in this manner, at the beginning of the apostolic era, at the hands of Philip: "Now when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away" (Acts 8:39).

Also because Baptism is a tincture, (Baptisma in Latin), and tinting is accomplished through immersion; and because Baptism is a burial with

Christ (Col. 2:12), and burial is accomplished through placing inside the tomb (immersion), and cannot be represented by sprinkling with water

Likewise in all the ancient vestiges, we see that baptism was accomplished inside a recipient that was called the baptistery.

That proves that baptizing was accomplished through immersion, and not by sprinkling water.

We remember, during this feast, many spiritual and doctrinal meanings, whether as regards the baptism of the Lord Christ at the hands of John the Baptist, or as regards the importance of Baptism in the Church.....

We remember also that the Lord came to the baptism of John, while He was not in need of it.

But that was in order "to fulfill all righteousness", so that He would be without blame before men, even while He is not in need. That also establishes before us the principle of obedience and the principle of loyalty, without asking what profit it is to us?

He entered the baptism of John also in order to be our representative, or to take our place, just as He fasted instead of us, and just as He was crucified instead of us.

Many of His actions were for the others and not for Himself. He took our place to present to God the Father an image of the perfect man, who satisfies the Father by His life, as well He satisfies Him by His redemption of the human kind.

In His baptism, we remember his humility

We remember His love and His fidelity, and His tenderness in His conversation with John, when He says: "Permit it to be so now".

The baptism of Christ also reminds us of our baptism , and of the care of the Church for Baptism.

Baptism is the first sacrament of the Church, and is the door through which we enter to the other sacraments.

We say vulgarly: "we have christianised so and so", that is: we have baptised him; because he has become a christian through baptism. That is an expression which is sound in its doctrinal meaning, and which reminds us of the word of Christ: "He who believes and is baptized will be saved" (Mark 16:16).

Therefore the day of baptism is a feast as regards the child and his family.

In that day, the Church gives him three sacraments: Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist also; and makes him ready to participate in

the life of the Church. He becomes a member in it, and takes the first ecclesiastical certificate in his life.

The Church assigns a sponsor to the child, who will care for him spiritually, and very often it is the mother who is the sponsor to her child.

The mother is engaged before God and the Church to take care of her child in the fear of God, and to be his first teacher, who instructs him, and who gives him the practical training for all religious matters.

THE LORD'S HUMILITY IN BAPTISM

The baptism of John was the baptism of repentance. The Lord Christ was not in need of repentance. Why then was He baptized?

He was baptized instead of the human kind in entering the baptism of repentance....

Likewise He fasted instead of us, while He was not in need of fasting, just as He was dead instead of us, while He was not deserving death.....

All this was in order to offer to the Father a perfect image of the human kind, and to pay the price of our sins. Likewise He presented Himself to baptism, in order "to fulfill all righteousness" (Matt. 4:15), so that nobody convicts Him of sin in order to be submissive to the Law, before everybody, although He is above the Law.....

Thus He walked with the crowds, as one of them, presenting Himself to the baptism of repentance.

What is this humility, which the Lord offers to us?! When John apologised saying: "I need to be baptized by You", the Lord replied: "Permit it to be so now"

In the same manner He permitted to His mother who is exemplar in her purity, who gave birth to Him from the Holy Spirit without stain, to present herself "when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses were completed to present Him to the Lord" (Luke 22:2), while she absolutely was not in need of days of purification.

The Lord Christ was not a sinner to present Himself to the baptism of repentance, but He was a bearer of sins. He has borne all the sins of the world.

"Now this is the testimony of John" who baptized Him" (John 1:19....).

Christ has borne the sins of the world, and descended with them to the baptism; likewise He has borne these sins upon the Cross, and erased them with His blood "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have

turned, every one, to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6).

The Lord Christ, although He was Righteous without sin, and defied the Jews later on saying to them: "Which of you convicts me of sin?" (John 8:46) yet He accomplished the rite of the baptism of repentance. He did not omit this spiritual act to which the repented crowds presented themselves. We have found Him walking like the rest of the people who were sinners, and advancing toward the baptism of repentance.

All of them were baptized confessing their sins. But He was baptized bearing the sins of all the people.

He did this, lest a fault would be caught, or a defect would be counted, against Him. And also in order "to fulfill all righteousness".

Also in order "to fulfill all righteousness", His mother the Holy Virgin Mary acted with the same humility.

It was mentioned in the story of her entry with Him to the temple: [Now when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought Him to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord: "Every male who opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord"), and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the law of the Lord: "A pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons"]. (Luke 2: 22-24)

It is astonishing that this expression is said about the Holy Virgin: "when the days of her purification.....were completed"!! The Holy Spirit had sanctified her womb during the holy pregnancy; and she conceived without the stain of the original sin; and was absolutely not at all in need of purification but, in order "to fulfill all righteousness", she submitted to the commandment of the law, while she was not in need of that.

Verily there are matters which the human being is not compelled to do, but he does them in order not to scandalise others and in order to fulfill all righteousness.....

Also because of the humility of the Lord, He obtained the baptism at the hands of John.

The greatest High Priest, who grants priesthood, obtained the baptism from one of his priests, from one of his sons.... from a person who had confessed saying to Him: "I need to be baptized by You" (Matt. 3:14); and likewise had confessed saying: "whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose"

The priesthood of the Lord Christ is of Melchisedek, and the priesthood of John is of Aaron.

It is well known that the priesthood of Melchisedek is greater than the priesthood of Aaron, as our teacher the apostle saint Paul explained in (Hebrews 7). Likewise Melchisedek blessed our father Abraham in whose loins Aaron was (Hebrews 7). Nevertheless, with all humility, He who was "a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek" (Psalm 110:4), presented Himself to obtain the baptism at the hands of one of the sons of Aaron!

In this, there is also some veneration from His part to the priesthood in His time.

Likewise, when He healed the leper, He said to him: "go your way, show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded, as a testimony to them" (Matt. 8:4).

Verily the Baptism's story is full of numerous examples of humility.

Also because of the Lord's humility, after all the glorious matters that appeared during His baptism, and the coming of the Holy Spirit, and the testimony of John after all this "He went up on a mountain", in order to be tempted by Satan, and permitted Satan to tempt Him, in all audacity, or more accurately speaking, in all pride and the Lord replied to him in all quietness, and defeated Satan with His humility

Also because of the humility of the Lord, He submitted to the Law in age as well as in baptism.

He waited till He reached the age of thirty according to the Law; while it was so easy for Him to begin many years before that, He who at the age of twelve, amazed the old teachers, "and all who heard Him were astonished at His understanding and answers" (Luke 2:47) But He waited till the age of thirty, and waited till He was baptized, and till He passed a period of solitude upon the mountainand then He began working

Christ humbled Himself from the beginning of His mission, in order to reply to the sin of the first Adam.

The first Adam responded to the incitement to become like God (Gen 3:5). That was undoubtedly a kind of pride. Then the Lord Christ the Son of God came, "taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men" (Philippians 2:7), walking in humility, in His birth in a manger representing poverty (Luke 2: 7), and also in His baptism at the hands of John who was in need to be baptized by Him

John the Baptist who baptized Him, was humble.....

although he was great, and the Lord Himself had attested of his greatness, and also the angel of the Lord, as we shall see.

THE BAPTIST'S GREATNESS

People certified of the greatness of many, but their testimony was either fictitious and false, or ignorant, or complimentary

But God Himself and His angel attested of the greatness of John the Baptist.

The angel of the Lord announced his birth to Zacharias his father: "For he will be great in the sight of the Lord" (Luke 1:15).

This expression is very astonishing: to be "great in the sight of the Lord", before whom every human being stands, feeling his insignificance, as our father Abraham said: "Indeed now, I who am but dust and ashes have taken it upon myself to speak to the Lord" (Gen. 18:27).

The expression "great in the sight of the Lord" does not mean His own feeling of his greatness, but it means that the Lord has given him greatness in order to stand before Him.

Thus greatness had been united with John before his birth, as the Lord testified.

Great works have been said about this great prophet: among them is that " he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord", "and many will rejoice at his birth" (Luke 1: 16-17, 14)

In all this we ask the angel who announced his birth, about the secret of this wonderful greatness, and he replies saying that

"He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb" (Luke 1:15).

Verily, this is the secret of John's greatness. We have heard in the Holy Bible that the Holy Spirit came upon many people: the Spirit of the Lord came upon Samson (Judges 13:15), upon Saul (1 Sam. 10: 10-11), upon David (1 Sam. 16:13), and upon many prophets. But we absolutely did not hear about anybody that "He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb". We note here the expression "filled with the Holy Spirit", and not only the coming of the Holy Spirit upon him. This matter is special to John the Baptist, and to nobody before him. But perhaps we ask:

When was John the Baptist filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb?

That was in the word of the Lord: "And it happened, when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, that the babe leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit" (Luke 1:41). Then Elizabeth "spoke with a loud voice and said" to the Holy Virgin Mary: "..... For

indeed, as soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy" (Luke 1:44).

At this moment, the moment of the greeting of Mary the mother of God, John was filled with the Holy Spirit, while he was in the womb of his mother.

By the Spirit, the babe (in Elizabeth's womb) felt the divine babe in the Holy Virgin's womb, and rejoiced at Him and was as if he ran to meet Him!! It was said that he leaped for joy, as the Lord said to the Jews: "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad" (John 8:56). What is astonishing is that Elizabeth felt that her babe leaped for joy in her womb. It is possible for her to feel a movement (leaped).

But I remained perplexed for sometime before the expression "for joy".

I was perplexed before two things. The first is the joy of the babe. The feeling of a babe in his mother's womb! The second is the mother's feeling that the movement of her babe inside her, is a movement for joy!!

It is undoubtedly a gift from the Spirit, because it was said about Elizabeth in that moment that she "was filled with the Holy Spirit" (Luke 1:41). This revelation can be a gift of the Spirit..... And here my perplexity ends.....

It was not only the angel of the Lord who testified of the greatness of John, but more than that, the Lord of glory Himself testified when He said: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? But what did you go out to see? A man clothed in soft garments? Indeed, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you and more than a prophet. For this is he of whom it is written: "Behold, I send My messenger before your face, who will prepare Your way before You. ***Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist***" (Matt. 11:7-11).

The Scriptures also said about him that he is an angel:

"Behold, I send My messenger before Your face" (Mark 1:2). The Lord Christ Himself certified this surname (Matt. 11:10).

This prophecy was mentioned about him in the book of the prophet Malachi: "Behold, I send My messenger" (Mal/ 3:1).

John also was a priest among the sons of Aaron, a son of the prophet Zacharias.....

The greatest matter in the life of John is that he baptized the Lord Christ, glory be to Him.

The Lord Christ came to him to be baptized by him like other people. John accomplished the baptism of Christ out of obedience, and deserved to see the Holy Spirit in the likeness of a dove, and to hear the voice of the Father saying: "This is My Beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:16-17). Thus he enjoyed the Holy Trinity both spiritually and sensationally.....

God rather guided John to Himself before the baptism:

Saint John the Baptist said about that: "I did not know Him, but He who sent me to baptize with water said to me: "Upon whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, this is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit. And I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God" (John 1: 33-34).

The greatness of John the Baptist appears in that he accomplished his great mission in a short time, perhaps six months or a little longer.

These six months are the difference between his age and the corporal age of the Lord Christ, according to what the archangel Gabriel said in his annunciation to the Holy Virgin of the Holy conception: "Now indeed, Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren" (Luke 1:36).

Each of both Christ and the Baptist began his life at the age of thirty. John served during these six months. And when Christ appeared, he began to hide. In this short period, that saint was able to lead many people to repentance, and to testify with a strong testimony to the Lord, and to prepare the way before Christ, and he presented to the whole world a practical example of the fact that:

the strength of service is not in its length, but in its deepness, and in the amount of its efficiency and the amount of its influence, and in its fruit.

Is it not astonishing that the Lord does not let many of the useful servants, serve for a long time?! It is enough that they have presented an excellent sample of service and righteousness. They have presented an example to be followed. The Lord was satisfied with what they had presented, and He let them go in peace.

John presented an excellent example of serious service, and profound spiritualities, which were agreeable to God who let them go in peace.

The greatness of John is distinguished in that he lived in his perfection in spite of the darkness of his generation.

It was a wicked age. Its spiritual leaders were the most wicked in that age, like the priests and the chiefs of the Jews. the scribes, the pharisees, and the saducees. During that age, sometime before, there rose up some

lying teachers like Theudas and Judas of Galilee about whom Gamaliel spoke, and they drew away many people after them (Acts 5: 36-37).

But saint John was not harmed by the corruption of his generation, but rather on the contrary he was a blessing for his generation, and a cause of repentance and good conduct for them.

John was great in that he was the son of mountains, who was brought up in the life of abnegation and ascetism.

He lived all his life in the deserts "till the day of his manifestation to Israel", growing and becoming "strong in spirit" (Luke 1:80). He lived as an ascet and did not "drink neither wine nor strong drink" (Luke 1:15); he was "clothed with camel's hair and with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey" (Mark 1:6).

In the desert, he learned prayer and meditation, he learned courage and lack of fear, and also firmness and faith; and he learned the strength which comes from abnegation.....

God prepared him in the desert, as He prepared the Holy Virgin in the temple.

He grew up courageous, not fearing any human being fit for being the author of a mission.

He told the truth in all strength, and did not care about what would be the consequences.....

King Herod sinned; and nobody had the courage to rebuke him or to confront him with truth, except John the Baptist. He was the only one who said to Herod: "It is not lawful for you to have her" (Matt. 14:4).

The king threw him into prison, but he did not care. An ascet like him who had relinquished everything, does not dread prison, even if his service is delayed. His thoughts during that, were:

"If God wills that he serves, then he will serve. And if God does not will, let His will be done. The important matter is to testify to the truth.

And it happened that John the Baptist was beheaded. But this voice which cries aloud in the desert, remained sounding in Herod's ear, disturbing his conscience, his thoughts, his sleep, his awakesness, and saying to him at every moment: "It is not lawful for you".

The voice of John did not die with the death of John.

Herod kept fearing John, even after his death. When he was informed about the strong predication and the miracles of Christ, he "said to his servants: "This is John the Baptist, he is risen from the dead, and therefore these powers are at work in him" (Matt. 14:2).

John treated Herod like the others: he testified of the truth to him, because Herod was in need of this testimony.

He resembled the prophet Elijah in his blame of the king.

Elijah rebuked king Achab for his worship of the idols (1 Kings 18: 17-18); and he was exposed because of that, to the anger of his wife Jezabel who threatened to kill him. John the Baptist rebuked king Herod, and he was exposed because of that, to the anger of Herodia whom Herod wanted to marry, and who then became the cause of the murder of John (Matt. 14: 6-11).

Thus John walked "in the spirit and power of E lijah" (Luke 1:17).

He called the people and said to them: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (Matt. 3:2). He was strong in his mission. He rebuked, criticised, and censured; and people accepted his criticism with an open heart.

The Scriptures say about that: "But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them: "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not think to say to yourselves: "We have Abraham as our father". For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (Matt. 3: 7-10).

JOHN THE BAPTIST'S ICON

John the Baptist's icon is the icon of the baptism of Christ by him.

But there are some who design an icon to John the Baptist like an angel with two wings and carrying his head on a plate in his hand.

They do that in consideration of the word of the Scriptures about him that he is the angel who prepares the way before the Lord (Mal.3:1), (Mark 1:2). And he really is so. As for carrying his head on a plate in his hand, that is true, because the martyrs carry their sufferings.

But this is a meditative icon and not a ritual icon.

It is supposed that icons which are put inside the churches, must be ritual icons. Therefore I refused to consecrate an icon like this in some churches in the countries of emigration. Why then?

The greatness of John the Baptist is not because he was called an angel. For all the pastors of churches have been called angels, and likewise the Lord gave this surname to all the seven churches in Asia (Apoc. 1:20), (Apoc. 2:3).

The greatness of John the Baptist also is not because he is a martyr carrying his sufferings. For there are tens of thousands, and rather millions of martyrs in the Church.

But his real greatness, is that he baptized Christ, the matter by which he was distinguished among the rest of the saints, and therefore he was surnamed the Baptist.

Hence the saint Church does not call him neither the angel John, nor John the martyr, nor the prophet John, but the Church calls him John the Baptist.

The ritual icon which represents him inside the church, is his image baptizing Christ. Likewise, his baptism of Christ is a feast of the Lord, which the Church celebrates. The fathers priests raise incense before this icon of the baptism; and they say whenever they go out of the sanctuary with incense: "Hail to you, O John son of Zacharias, the priest and son of a priest".

There is no other saint like him, whom the Church salutes in every raising of incense at evening and morning, and in every mass.

HIS BAPTISM OF CHRIST

The greatest act of John the Baptist, is his baptism of the Lord Christ.

Here we see two great situations of humility. The first is the coming of Christ to be baptized by his servant John. The second is that great prophet saying to the Lord: "I need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?" (Matt. 3:14).

"I also am a sinner, in need of the baptism of repentance.

I am a teacher before these people, but before You, I am a disciple.

Before them, I am a prophet and an angel, but before You, I am dust and ashes.

I am a priest before them, but You are the source of my priesthood and every priesthood."

All the greatness that surrounded John, and all the tremendous popularity which he had, did not make him forget the insignificance of himself before Christ.....

He did like his mother Elizabeth when she said to the Holy Virgin: "But why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (Luke 1:43).

John said to the Lord: "I need to be baptized by You". And the Lord did not say to him that he did not need, but He said: "Permit it to be so now" (Matt. 3:15), which is an astonishing expression from the mouth of the Lord, and is addressed to one of his servants.

He said to him, tenderly and gently: "I do not command you, but I ask for your permission, I ask for your agreement..... in order "to fulfill all righteousness....."

NOT I

The Baptist was successful in his service.

"Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him and were baptized by him in the Jordan confessing their sins" (Matt. 3:5).

Naturally the only One who did not confess sins when He presented Himself to baptism, was Christ, because He had absolutely no sins to confess.

When John saw the crowds increasing around him, he transferred their looks from him to Christ, meaning: "not I".

He made all his efforts in order to hide himself, and that Christ appears. This is the most distinguished virtue and the most profound work of this saint.

He said to the people: "I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Matt. 3:11).

As he attracted them to another baptism which is greater than his baptism, so also he attracted them the more, to the author of this baptism, saying that He is stronger and higher and more ancient than him.

He said: "There comes One after me who is mightier than I, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to stoop down and loose" (Mark 1:7). "After me comes a Man who is preferred before me, for He was before me" (John 1:30). "I am not the Christ, but, I have been sent before Him" (Matt. 3:28).

The Baptist did not say all that, as mere words of humility,

or that he degraded his level before the people.....

The true humility, as the saints say, is that man knows himself. And John, in his humble words, knew exactly who was he, and who was Christ? and he spoke out of truthfulness and out of humility.....

He was the greatest "among those born of women". But he, and all those born of women, are all mere servants before Christ; even the angels, as the apostle says: [But when He again brings the firstborn into the world, he says: "Let all the angels of God worship Him"] (Hebr. 1:6).

This saint did not seek his own glory, but he sought the kingdom of Christ.

He understood that "He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light" (John 1:8), "that all through him might believe" (John 1:7). He knew that he was simply a predecessor before the convoy of the coming king; all his work consisted of preparing the way for the king.

John was able to keep his ritual, and not to trespass over his limits.

For him selfishness was dead; and Christ was all in all.

That is a lesson to the servants who build themselves at the account of service, or to them who consider service as a simple field where they can manifest themselves!!

The most marvelous word that exhibits John's service, is his word about Christ: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). He also said about Him: "He who comes from above is above all He who comes from heaven is above all" (John 3:31). Thereby he indicates the divinity of Christ, because He came from heaven, therefore He is above all, including also John.....

Hence, when the predication of Christ had begun and started to sway the atmosphere of service, John rejoiced and was glad (John 3:29). He said: "Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled. He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice." As for me, I am merely the friend of the bridegroom, I look from afar and rejoice.

Thus he rendered the groom to the bridegroom.

He rendered to Him the church which he had prepared for Him through repentance, and he also rendered to Him his disciples, and he joyfully withdrew from the field, releasing the leadership to the Lord.

Nevertheless, while John humbled himself, he was raised up.

According to the word of the Lord Christ: "whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Matt. 23:12). When John humbled himself and said: "I must decrease", the Lord exalted him, and made him the greatest among those born of women.

Of course he meant the greatest among "men" or "prophets" born of women. Because the Holy Virgin Mary, who is among those born of women, is undoubtedly greater than him.

During the feast of the Epiphany, we also remember our own baptism.

OUR OWN BAPTISM

Our baptism is something other than the baptism of John.

It is not simply a baptism for repentance. We note that when the apostle saint Paul was predicating in Ephesus, he asked the disciples there, saying: ["Into what then were you baptized?" So they said: "Into John's baptism." Then Paul said: "John indeed baptized with a baptism of repentance, saying to the people that they should believe on Him who would come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus. When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 19: 3-5).

Our baptism is a birth from water and the Spirit.

According to what the Lord said to Nicodemus: "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (John 3:5).

Our baptism is death and resurrection with Christ.

As the apostle says to the Colossians about Christ: "buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him" (Col. 2:12).

He told the same meaning to the Romans: "Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death.....For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection" (Rom. 6: 3-5).

Death here means the death of our ancient man.

As the apostle says: "knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with" (Rom. 6:6).

We obtain salvation through our baptism.

As the Lord said: "He who believes and is baptized will be saved" (Mark 16:16).

And as the apostle saint Paul said about it: "but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5). And as also the apostle saint Peter said about the ark: "in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water. There is also an antitype which now saves us, baptism" (1 Peter 3: 20-21).

Salvation through baptism means salvation from all sins before baptism. And this means justification and renovation:

Salvation from the original sin, and salvation from all the actual sins before baptism. Renovation means the renovation of our nature (Rom 6:4).

As the old man dies in baptism, so a new man is raised up in the likeness of Christ.

The apostle saint Paul said about that: "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (Gal. 3:27). That is, you have put on the righteousness that is in Him (Here is the action of justification which is in baptism).

*May the blessing of saint John the Baptist be with us all.
Many happy returns for you all.*

Pope Shenouda III series

8

***THE FEAST
OF
THE CROSS***

***BY HIS HOLINESS AMBA SHENOUDA III,
POPE AND PATRIARCH OF ALEXANDRIA
AND OF THE APOSTOLIC SEE OF
ALL THE PREDICATION OF SAINT MARK***

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His Holiness Pope Shenouda III
Pope and Patriarch of the See of Alexandria and of all the
Predication of the Evangelist St. Mark

*In the Name of
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
the One God,
Amen*

*In this pamphlet, you read about:
The importance and the spiritual significance
of the Cross.
The Cross in the life of Christ.
The Cross in the lives of the apostles
and all the saints
and in the lives of the fathers monks.
The glories of the Cross.
The spiritual meanings of the Cross.
The theological and doctrinal meanings.
How to bear a cross in practical life.
Saint Helen who discovered the Cross.*

Pope Shenouda III

The Church celebrates the feast of the Cross on the 17th of Tot, (27th or 28th of September), the day of the apparition of the Cross to the Emperor Constantin, and on the 10th of Baramhat (19th of March), the day when the Empress Helen found the wood of the Holy Cross.

We want to-day to speak about the spiritual meaning of the Cross, and about the importance and benediction of the Cross, in our lives.

The Cross is every difficulty which we suffer in view of our love for God, or for our love for people, for the Kingdom of God in general.

THE LORD CHRIST AND THE CROSS

The Lord invited to bear the Cross and said: "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me" (Matt. 16:24) (Mark 8:34). And He said to the rich young man: "Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and come, take up the cross, and follow Me" (Mark 10:21).

He made the bearing of the Cross a condition for the discipleship to Him.

He said: "And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:27).

He Himself, during all the period of His Incarnation on earth, lived bearing the Cross.

Since His Nativity, Herod wanted to kill Him, and He run away with His mother to Egypt. When He began his mission, he suffered the fatigue of the service, and had "nowhere to lay His head" (Luke 9: 58). He lived a life of pain, so that Isaiah said about Him that He is: "A Man of sorrow and acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3). He was bitterly persecuted by the Jews. Once they "took up stones again to stone Him" (John 10:31). Another time they wanted to "throw Him down over the cliff" (Luke 4:29). As for their insults and their accusation of Him, they are very numerous. All these are crosses which are other than the Cross on which He was crucified.....

THE CROSS IN THE LIVES OF SAINTS

The disciples of Christ also placed the Cross before their eyes.

They preached continually..... and said about that: "but we preach Christ crucified" although He is "to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness" (1 Cor. 1:23). The apostle saint Paul said: "For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). He rather boasted in the Cross saying: "But God

forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Gal. 6:14).

Even the angel who announced the Resurrection, used this expression " Jesus who was crucified". He said to the two Mariam: "I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. he is not here; for He is risen, as He said" (Matt. 28:5). Thus he called Him "Jesus who was crucified" although He was already risen. The expression " who was crucified" remained attached to him, and our fathers the apostles used it and concentrated their predication on it. As saint Peter said to the Jews "know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36).

The Cross is the narrow gate in which the Lord invited us to enter (Matt.7:13).

He said to us:

"In the world you will have tribulation" (John 16:33);

"And you will be hated by all for my name's sake" (Matt. 10:22);

"yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service" (John 16:2);

"If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you" (John 15:19).

Thus the apostle saint Paul taught: "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22).

The life of the Cross is evident in the lives of the martyrs, the abbots, and the ascetics.

In view of the faith, the martyrs and the confessors suffered unbearable torments and agonies. The majority of the early apostles and bishops marched in the way of martyrdom.

When the Lord called Saul of Tarsus to become an apostle for the gentiles, He said about him "For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake" (Acts 9:16). We can mention as an example, the apostolic saint Athanassius of the abbots and the cross which they carried. He was exiled three times and he was exposed to bad accusations; and saint John Chrysostom who was also exiled..... and the incarceration and ostracisation to which the fathers were exposed.

As for the fathers monks, the Church surnames them "the cross bearers".

They have borne the cross of solitude and aloofness from every human consolation, and the cross of ascetism in which they were denuded from every corporal desire. They suffered the pains of hunger, thirst, cold, heat, poverty, and penury, in view of the greatness of their love the King Christ. They also suffered the afflictions and the warfare of the

devils in various ways and kinds, as in the life of saint Antonios, and the lives of the the wandering anchorites.

THE CROSS PRECEDES RESURRECTION

Christ was elevated over the level of the earth in His Crucifixion.

He was also elevated over the level of the tomb in His Resurrection.

He was elevated over the level of all the world in His Ascension to heaven and in His sitting at the right side of the Father. He was rather elevated over the level of this heaven.

These are degrees of elevation, all of which He had begun by the Cross.

Rather before that, He was elevated over the level of self-preoccupation in His Nativity. He "made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant" (Philippians 2:7).

The Cross of the Lord preceded His Resurrection; and His making Himself of no reputation preceded His glory.

Pain always precedes the crowns. Thus the apostle saint Paul said:

"if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together" (Rom. 8:17).

Thus he showed us the value and the results of pain. He rather considered pain as a gift in life to us from God. He said:

"For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake" (Philippians 1:29). Pain is considered to be a gift because of its crowns.

Our Lord established the bearing of the cross as a condition to discipleship to Him. He said: "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up the cross, and follow Me" (Matt. 16:24). He said more than that: "And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:27).

Such as the bearing of the cross is a condition for life with God, so also it is a test of seriousness and steadfastness in His way.

The tribulations to which the faithful man is exposed during his life, are a test of the extent of his steadfastness in faith. Thus the Lord said: "in the world you will have tribulation" (John 16:33). While He was on his way to the Cross, He permitted that his disciples should encounter the bearing of the cross, so that the extent of their steadfastness should appear. He said: "Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat" (Luke 22:31).

For this reason, the Holy Church has placed the martyrs in the highest order of saints

because they were those who have suffered the cross more than all the others, in view of their constancy in the faith. The Church places also with them the confessors who confessed the faith and suffered many torments, although they did not obtain the crown of martyrdom.

If you bear a cross, accept that joyfully because of the crowns which you will obtain, if you do not complain and do not doubt.

It was said about the sufferings of Christ our Lord that He "for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb. 12:2). Here we find the Cross with joy in enduring it, and glory resulting from it.....

You will encounter many kinds of crosses. Among them, there are exertion, toleration, patience, fatigue in service and in repentance, and also discipline from God and from the fathers.....

Do not grumble then, whenever you bear a cross; and do not think that spiritual life must be easy, and its way covered with flowers.

Otherwise, on what account will you be rewarded in eternity? And also, what is the meaning of the words of the Lord concerning the narrow gate (Matt. 7:13)?

CHRISTIAN LIFE IS A CROSS

In fact, christian life is practically a journey to Golgotha; and christianity without a cross is really not christianity.

Those who have received their good things on earth, will have no share in the Kingdom, as the story of the rich man and Lazarus explains to us (Luke 16:25). We say that, as regards individuals, just as we say it as regards groups and churches also. For christianity is a participation in the sufferings of Christ, as the apostle saint Paul said: "that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death" (Philippians 3:10). He said also about this participation in the sufferings:

"I have been crucified with Christ, it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me" (Gal. 2:20).

So that if you want to live with Christ, you must be crucified with Christ, or you must be crucified for Him, and suffer for Him, even if that would lead to die for Him also.

THE CROSS AND ITS GLORIES

In christianity, you suffer, you find pleasure in suffering, and you obtain crowns for your suffering which is transformed into glory.

Christianity is not a cross which you carry, and grumble and protest in your complaint! No, but it is the love of the cross, the love of suffering and sacrifice and fatigue for the Lord and for the expansion of His

kingdom. It was said about the Lord Christ: "who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame"(Heb.12:2).

The apostle saint Paul said: "Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake" (2 Cor. 12:10).... And after having been scourged, the fathers apostles "departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name" (Acts 5:41)..... But about the glories of sufferings, the apostle says:

"if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together" (Rom. 8:17).

Therefore he said after that: "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (Rom. 8:18). And thus the apostle saint Peter said: "But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you are blessed" (1 Peter 3:14).

Hence sufferings are accompanied by blessings. The Lord Christ has mentioned them saying: "Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matt. 5: 11-12).

Here we find that the sufferings for the Lord are associated with joy and jubilation and with the celestial reward.

Truly: because after the cross, there is resurrection and ascension, and also sitting at the right side of the Father.

If christianity were only a cross, without glories, people would have been tired, and as the apostle said: "If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable" (1 Cor. 15:19). But christians in their bearing of the cross, look at the eternal glories "while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal" (2 Cor. 4:18).

Therefore, with the external fatigue, there is peace and consolation.

Saint Stephan at the time of his lapidation, saw the heavens opened, "and saw the glory of God" (Acts 7: 55,56). What joy had he at that time....!

There is another joy which the martyrs felt; it is that they had completed the days of their expatriation on earth and the moment of their encounter with the Lord approached.....Some of them saw the crowns and the glories..... and some others had holy visions that consoled them...

We do not separate the cross from its rejoicing and its glories: also we do not separate it from the assistance and grace of God.

The christian might carry a cross, but he does not carry it alone, and God does not leave him alone. There is a divine assistance that supports and upholds. It is that assistance which stood with the martyrs till they supported the sufferings, and which stands with the faithful in every tribulation. There is the encouraging expression of the Lord: "Do not be afraid for I am with you, and no one will attack you to hurt you" (Acts 18: 9,10); "Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go" (Joshua 1:9).

"They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you. For I am with you", says the Lord, "to deliver you" (Jer. 1:19).

THE LOVE OF CHRISTIANITY FOR THE CROSS

The cross is an emblem to which every christian clings because of its spiritual and doctrinal meanings.

We suspend it on the churches, we include it in all our sculptures, we suspend it on our breasts, we make its sign on ourselves, we begin our prayers with it, we sign it on our food, we sanctify with it all that we possess. The men of the clergy carry it in their hands, and they bless the people with it. The cross is used in all the ecclesiastical sacraments, and in all the signings and the consecrations, in the belief that all the blessings of the New Testament came as a result of the Cross. The clothes of the clerical men are adorned with the cross, not just for ornamentation, but for its benediction and its power. We celebrate two feasts for the Cross, and we carry the cross during the processions and the celebrations.

We see that there is a power in the signing of the Cross, which the devils dread.

All the pains of the devil to ruin human beings, has been lost by means of the deliverance which was realised on the Cross. Therefore Satan dreads the sign of the cross..... on condition that the signing of the cross is done with faith and reverence. The apostle saint Paul said: "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor. 1:18).

That is why a christian fortifies himself with the signing of the cross.

HOW TO BEAR PRACTICALLY YOUR CROSS

The cross is a sign of love, bestowal, sacrifice, and redemption, which you carry each time you are tired in view of the practice of these virtues.

Try to get tired for the rest of another, and for his deliverance and his service; and be confident that God does never forget the fatigue of charity, "and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor" (1 Cor. 3:8)... Train yourself to give: whatever you bestow and support and sacrifice..... and train yourself to give from your necessities, as the blessed widow had done (Luke 21:4)..... Get tired in your service, because it is as much as you get tired, so much your love will appear, and therefore your sacrifice.

2. The Cross is also a sign of sufferings and endurance:

The sufferings which the Lord endured for us, whether the sufferings of the body, of which He said: "They pierced My hands and My feet; I can count all My bones" (Ps. 22: 16-17) or the sufferings of shame which He joyfully endured for us, that is He was rejoicing for our salvation.

Therefore the apostle said about Him: "who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame" (Heb: 12:2). How great is the endurance when it is joyfully done. That is a lesson for us.

While you suffer a cross, if you endure the tribulation of the cross for the Lord, or if you encounter persecution because of your justice, or if you are hit with disease or weakness for that..... likewise if you endure the wearisome deeds of people without taking revenge for yourself, but rather you turn the other cheek, and you walk the second mile, and do not resist an evil person (Matt. 5:39), but rather you act with patience, ... and patience is a cross, ... whether your endurance is within the circle of the family, or in the field of service, or in relation to your work.

3. You will bear a cross, if you crucify the flesh with its passions (Gal. 5:24).

You make efforts to crucify a craving or a guilty desire, and you conquer yourself. You crucify your thoughts each time they want to make you wandering. Likewise you restrain your senses, you bridle your tongue, you constrain yourself, and forbid your body to take food, enduring hunger, keeping away from every appetising food, and from every corporal pleasure and from the love of money.

4. You bear your cross in your self-denial, by taking the last place,

by not seeking dignity, by your giving up your rights, by not taking your reward on earth, by preferring others to yourself in everything with love that "does not seek its own" (1 Cor. 13:5), by humility and renouncement, and by keeping away from praise and dignity.

5. You bear your cross by bearing the sins of others, because our Lord the Christ has done so.

There is no objection that you would bear the guilt of another one and be punished for that instead of him; or that you bear the responsibilities of another one, and to carry them on instead of him. And as saint Paul said to Philemon about Onesimus: "But if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account. I, Paul, an writing with my own hand, I will repay" (Philemon 18-19)..... As much as you can, participate in the sufferings of others, and carry them in their place. Be a cyrenian bearing the cross of another.

SPIRITUAL MEANINGS OF THE CROSS

When we make the sign of the cross, we remember many of the theological and spiritual meanings which are connected to it.

1. We remember the love of God for us, who accepted death instead of us, in view of our salvation. ***"All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned, every one, to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all" (Is. 53:6)***. When we make the sign of the cross, we remember "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). "And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world" (1 John 2:2).

2. And in the Cross, we remember our sins.

Our sins which He has borne on the Cross, and for which He Incarnated and was crucified.....

With this remembrance, we become humiliated, our souls become contrite, and we thank for the price which He paid for us "For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's" (1 Cor. 6:20).

3. And in the Cross, we remember the divine justice:

How forgiveness was not on account of justice. But the divine justice took his right on the Cross. We do not then consider sin as a slight matter, the sin whose price is such as that.

4. In our signing of the Cross, we declare our discipleship to this crucified One.

Those who take the cross simply by its spiritual meaning, inside the heart, without any apparent sign, do not openly manifest this discipleship which we declare by signing the cross, by carrying the cross on our breasts, by kissing the cross in front of everybody, by drawing it on our hands, and by raising it above the places in which we worship.

With all this, we openly declare our faith, and we are not ashamed of the Cross of Christ in front of people, but rather we boast of it, we hold fast to it, we celebrate feasts for it Even without speaking, our plain aspect manifests our faith.....

5. We do not make the sign of the cross on ourselves in a silent manner, but we say with that: In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Thus each time we declare our faith in the Holy Trinity who is One God for ever to eternity, amen. Thus the Holy Trinity is continually in our thoughts, and that is not available to those who do not make the sign of the cross as we do.

6. In making the sign of the cross, we also declare our belief in Incarnation and Redemption:

When we make the sign of the cross from upward to downward, and from the left side to the right side, we remember that God has come down from heaven downward to our earth, and transported people from the left side to the right side, from obscurity to light, and from death to life; and how many are the meditations which come to our hearts and minds from the signing of the cross!

7. We remember forgiveness in the Cross,

how our sins were forgiven on the Cross, and how our Lord addressed the heavenly Father saying (while He was on the Cross): "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do" (Luc 23:34)....

8. In the signing of the cross, there is a religious instruction for our sons and for others:

Whoever makes the sign of the cross, when he prays, when he enters the church, when he eats, when he sleeps, and at every moment, he remembers the Cross. This remembrance is spiritually useful and scripturally desirable. In it there is also an instruction for people, that Christ was crucified, and an instruction specially for our small children who grow from their childhood being used to the cross.

9. By making the sign of the cross we preach the death of the Lord for us, conforming to his commandment.

This is the commandment of the Lord who has redeemed us, to preach His "death till He comes" (1 Cor. 11:26)..... In making the sign the cross we remember His death at all times, and we keep remembering Him till He comes.

We also remember Him in the sacrament of Eucharist. But this sacrament is not done every moment, while we can make the sign of the cross at every moment, remembering the death of Christ for our sake.....

10. In making the sign of the cross, we remember that the retribution of sin is death:

because otherwise Christ would not have died; "we were dead in trespasses" (Eph. 2:5). But Christ died instead us upon the Cross and gave us life. Having paid the price on the Cross, He said to the Father: "Father, forgive them" (Luke 23:34).

11. In making the sign of the cross, we remember the love of God for us:

We remember that the cross is a sacrifice of love. "***For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life***" (John 3:16)..... and we remember that "God demonstrated His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us..... and we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son" (Rom. 5: 8,10).

In the Cross, we remember the love of God for us, because "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends" (John: 15:13).

12. We make the sign of the cross because it gives us power.

The apostle saint Paul felt that power of the Cross, and said: "by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Gal. 6:14). And he also said: "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor. 1:18).

Note that he did not say that the crucifixion is the power of God, but he said that the simple word of the cross is the power of God.

Therefore when we make the sign of the cross, and when we mention the cross, we are filled with power; because we remember that the Lord trampled death by the cross, and He granted life to everybody, and forced and defeated Satan. Therefore....

we make the sign of the cross, because Satan dreads it:

All the labour of Satan since he fought Adam until the end of time, has been lost on the Cross, because the Lord has paid the price, and erased all the sins of people with His blood, for those who believe and obey. Therefore Satan whenever he sees the cross, he is terrified and remembers his greatest defeat and the loss of his labour, and so he is ashamed and runs away.

Thus all the sons of God constantly use the sign of the cross, considering that it is the sign of conquest and victory, that it is the power of God. As for our part, we are filled with power inside. But the enemy outside is scared.

And as in ancient times the bronze serpent was lifted up, as a healing for people and salvation from death, even so the Lord of glory was lifted up on the Cross. (John 3:14). Thus is the sign of the cross in its effect.

14. We make the sign of the cross, and take its blessing:

In ancient times, the cross was the sign of malediction and death because of sin..... But on the Cross, the Lord bore all our maledictions, in order to grant us the benediction of the reconciliation with God (Rom. 5:10), and the benediction of the new life. Therefore all the gracious things of the New Testament come from the Cross.

Therefore the clergy men use this cross in the giving of benediction, as an indication that the benediction is not issued from them personally, but from the cross of the Lord who has entrusted them to use it for granting benediction, and because they take their ministry from the ministry of Him who was crucified. All the blessings of the New Testament follow the cross of the Lord and its effect.

15. *Therefore we use the cross in all the holy sacraments of Christianity,*

because they all have their source in the merits of the blood of Christ on the cross.

Without the cross, we could not deserve to come near to God as sons in Baptism; and we could not deserve the communion of his body and blood in the mystery of Eucharist (1 Cor. 11:26), and we could not enjoy the blessings of any mystery from the mysteries of the Church.

16. *We pay attention to the Cross in order to remember our participation in it.*

We remember the word of the apostle saint Paul: "***I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me***" (Gal. 2:20). And also his word: "***that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death***" (Philippians 3:10). Here we ask ourselves when shall we enter into participation with the sufferings of the Lord and shall be crucified with Him.

And here we remember the thief who was crucified with Him, and deserved to be with Him in paradise. Probably he is in paradise singing with the song that saint Paul said later "I have been crucified with Christ....."

All our wishes are that we ascend on the cross with Christ, and to boast about this cross which we remember now whenever we touch it with our senses.

17. *We honor the cross, because it is a subject of joy for the Father:*

The Father who has accepted Christ on the cross with all joy, as a sin sacrifice and also as "a burnt sacrifice, an offering made by fire, a sweet aroma to the Lord" (Lev.1: 5,13,17).

The Lord Christ has satisfied the Father with the perfection of His life on earth, but He entered into the fullness of this satisfaction on the Cross, where He "became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross" (Philippians 2:8).

Each time we look at the cross, we remember the perfection of obedience, and the perfection of subjection, in order to imitate the Lord Christ in his obedience, to the point of death.

As the cross was a subject of joy for the Father, so also it was a subject of joy as regards the Son who was crucified, of whom it was said: "who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame" (Heb. 12:2).

Thus was the fullness of Christ's joy in His crucifixion. May we be like that.

18. In the cross, "we go forth to Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach" (Heb. 13:12)

with the same feelings which we have in the holy week.....and in that, we remember what was said about the prophet Moses: "esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt" (Heb. 11:26). The reproach of Christ is His crucifixion and His sufferings.

19. On the cross, we remember the salvation which the thief who was crucified with the Lord obtained:

That gives us a wonderful hope. How could a man be saved in the last hours of his life on earth, and get a promise to enter the paradise.

How the Lord with His spiritual influence on this thief, had been able to draw him to Himself, and remember his faith and his confession, without remembering any of his previous sins.

How great is that hope which was realised on the cross.

20. We bear the cross which reminds us of His second coming:

As it has been mentioned in the gospel about the end of the world and the coming of the Lord: "Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven" (that is the cross).....and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds....." (Matt. 24:30).

Let us remember the sign of the Son of Man on earth, so long as we expect this sign of His in heaven in His majestic coming.

***THE JUST QUEEN
SAINT HELEN***

*We remember her on the occasion of
the Feast of the Cross*

The Orthodox Coptic Church celebrates her feast on the 9th of Bashans, (the 17th of May), the day of her death in the year 327 AD, and we also remember her on the 17th of Tot, (the 27th or the 28th of September), the day of the feast of the Cross.

The Church also remembers her in the assembly of saints in the prayers of the "Psalmody", asking for her prayers and the prayers of her son the Emperor Constantin..... Our brothers the Orthodox Greeks build churches on her name, and they celebrate her feast and the feast of her son on the 21st of Ayar. The Latin Church celebrates her feast on the 18th of Aab (August).

Her son Emperor Constantin honored her. He gave her the surname "Augusta", meaning queen. He gave her the power over the Imperial treasures. She spent generously and liberally on the construction of churches. She gave to the poor and the needy persons and cities.

The historian Eusebius of Cesarea said about her, that during her wandering in the Eastern States, she presented numerous proofs of her magnanimity as an Empress, and of her imperial generosity upon the inhabitants of the various cities as communities and upon the individuals, as well as she offered many aids with the utmost lavishness. She gave money to some, and big quantities of clothes to others. She liberated some from prisons, or from the slavery of service in the mines. She delivered others from the violence of persecution, and brought back some others from exile (K3 F44).

She was very religious. She went to church, with simple modest clothes, although she was an empress, and she stood with all veneration among the masses. She was constant in her prayers, and she attended the religious celebrations, and lived as a worshipper more than she lived as a queen. She visited the holy places, bearing the fatigues of travel in her old age.

The Lord suggested to her in a vision, to go to Jerusalem, and to search exactly for the place of the glorious Cross.

She went there, and inquired, and discovered three crosses. Saint Macarius, the Bishop of Jerusalem, accompanied her. God manifested the holy cross with a miracle, as it appears in the synaxaire of the 17th of Tot.

She placed the cross in a golden box, and gave it to the bishop, and she kept a part of it for her son Constantin who placed some of the holy nails in his protective covering.

Saint Helen constructed a church in Behtlehem, at the cave where our Lord was born, and she built another one on the Mount of Olives, at the place of the Ascension of the Saviour.

She began the construction of the church of the Resurrection.....

Her son the emperor Constantin presented to her all that was necessary for her holy work. He sent letters in relation to that, to the governors and to the bishops.

This saint specified numerous unalienable properties for the churches and the monasteries, and for spending on the poor. She celebrated a feast in Jerusalem for the sacred virgins, and she herself served them.

She built a church on the name of the martyr saint Lucianos in the town where she was born, which her son called Helenopolis on her name Helen, in her honor.

This saint died in 327 AD at the age of 84 years. She wrote her testament to her son the Emperor, and to her grandsons the ceasars, inciting them to be firm in the life of faith and justice.

SOME VERSETS TO BE STUDIED AND RECALLED FROM MEMORY ABOUT THE CROSS

"I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me" (Gal. 2:20).

"And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (Gal. 5:24).

"But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Gal. 6:14).

"For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor. 1:18).

".....having made peace through te blood of His cross" (Col. 1:20).

"For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus-Christ and Him crucified" (1Cor. 2:2).

"And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:27).

"knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him" (Rom. 6:6).

"for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (1 Cor. 2:8).

Pope Shenouda III series

6

***MEDITATIONS
ON
THE FEAST OF THE
ASCENSION***

***BY HIS HOLINESS AMBA SHENOUDA III,
POPE AND PATRIARCH OF ALEXANDRIA
AND OF THE APOSTOLIC SEE OF
ALL THE PREDICATION OF SAINT MARK***

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His Holiness Pope Shenouda III

Pope and Patriarch of the See of Alexandria and of all the

Predication of the Evangelist St. Mark

The Cover of the book.

*In the Name of
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
the One God,
Amen*

In this pamphlet, you read about:

- *The manner of The Ascension*
- *The glorious body – is not against the terrestrial gravitation.*
- *A proof of His Divinity.*
- *The meaning of the sitting at the right of the Father.*
- *He was not separated from The Church during His Ascension.*
- *A weaning operation for the Apostles*
- *His Ascension is a pledge for our ascension*
- *Meditations on the Ascension*
- *The spiritual life is an ascension*
- *The wisdom of the ten days*

Pope Shenouda III

FOREWORD

I have the pleasure to present to you this booklet about the glorious Feast of The Ascension, in which I shall converse with you about:

- **The Ascension of The Lord Jesus-Christ was with the body.**
- **It was an Ascension with a glorious body. It was not against the terrestrial gravitation.**
- **What is the meaning of His Ascension on the clouds? What is His relation to the clouds?**
- **The Ascension is a proof of His Divinity, and is the end of “making Himself of no reputation”.**
- **What is the meaning of His sitting at the right of the Father?**
- **In His Ascension, The Lord Christ was not separated from His Church.**
- **His Ascension was an operation of weaning for**

His Apostles.

- **His Ascension is the pledge of our ascension to Him.**
- **Some meditations on the Ascension. Lessons from the glory of The Ascension.**
- **All the spiritual life is an ascension.**
- **The wisdom of the ten days between The Ascension and The Pentecost.**

Pope Shenouda III

The Church celebrates The Feast of The Ascension, on Thursday on the fortieth day after The Resurrection of The Lord, and we would like to meditate together on the spiritual meanings that are included in that Feast, so that we can celebrate it with a deep comprehension of the inspirations which are embodied in the Feast.....

The Christ spent forty day with His Apostles after the Resurrection, and on the fortieth day he bade them farewell, and promised them that they
“shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon” them.
(Acts 1:8).....

“Now when He had spoken these things, while they

watched, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up,

” – two angels stood by them and said to them: “why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven.” (Acts 1: 9-11)

What is then our meditation in this Ascension?

* * *

The Feast of The Ascension is a feast of The Lord. The miracle of The Ascension is special to the Lord Christ alone.
It has never happened to any human being, but it was exclusively for The Lord: like His virginal birth. It was like His Resurrection by the power of His Divinity and His coming out of the closed tomb, and like The Transfiguration on the mount Tabor. Such also was His Ascension to heaven and His sitting at the right of The Father.

He ascended by Himself, and not like the prophet Elias who was taken by a chariot of fire and ascended into it. (2 Kings 2: 10-11)

And not like Enoch who *“was not, for God took him. (Genesis 5:24)*

As for The Lord Christ, He ascended by His power, without any external power.

* * *

In the same manner as He arose by His own power alone, without anybody arising Him, so also He ascended by His power.

The power of the Ascension was in Him, just as the power of The Resurrection was in Him. His glory appeared in both.

HOW WAS THE ASCENSION

It was an Ascension with the body, with the human nature:

because the Divine Nature neither ascends nor descends. He fills all. He is present in Heaven and on earth, and in what is between both of them. How then would He ascend to Heaven while He is in Heaven?! And how would He leave the Earth to go to Heaven, while He remains on earth during His Ascension?! Consequently we must say that The Lord ascended with the body (that was united to the Divine Nature). That is what we say to Him during the prayer of the Holy Gregorian Mass: “at the moment of Your bodily Ascension into Heaven”.

* * *

The Ascension of The Lord was in the clouds:

“while they watched, he was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight.” (Acts 1:9)

He ascended in glory on a cloud, such as also He will come in His second coming, on the clouds in glory. He said thus to the chief priests during his trial before the Crucifixion, *“hereafter: you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven.” (Matt. 26:64)*

This expression adds that the sitting at the right hand of the Father, was one of the glories of the Ascension.

In the Holy Bible, the clouds represents the glory and the coming of the Lord. In the story of the blessing of the seventy elders as assistants to the prophet Moses, the Lord says about Moses: *“the Lord came down in a cloud and spoke with him....”* And when the tabernacle was finally erected and arranged, the divine Intuition said: *“Then the cloud covered the*

tabernacle of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tabernacle of meeting, because the cloud rested above it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.” (Exodus 40: 34-35)

In the New Testament, before the miracle of The Transfiguration:

“And a cloud came and overshadowed them; and a voice came out of the cloud, saying, ”This is My beloved Son, Hear Him!” (Mark 9:7), (Luke 9:35)

CHRIST DID NOT PART FROM US IN HIS ASCENSION

The Lord Christ was with the Apostles in the flesh....then He Ascended from them, but He did not part from them.

The Ascension of Christ to heaven, was not a separation from His Church on earth.

**It was not a separation from the Church; it was not relinquishing or forsaking the Church, because He said:
“ I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” (Matt. 28:20)
And He said also:**

“For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.” (Matt. 18:20)

**Consequently He is with us in the Church, and in every spiritual meeting. He is with us in the Holy Eucharist in every mass. He is [Immanuel, which is translated “God with us”.
(Matt. 1:23)]**

**The Apocalypse gives us a moving picture of The Lord Christ walking in the midst of the seven churches, holding in His right hand seven stars that are the pastors of the churches.
(Apoc. 2:1)**

He also abides in us, and we in Him (John 17), and He

also dwells in our hearts through faith (*Ephesus 3:17*).

It is just simply that He is with us in an invisible manner.

For we have become in the New Testament in a state of spiritual maturity, in which we live by the word of The Lord:

“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” (John 20:29)

We believe in the existence of God with us, without seeing Him, and we believe in the existence of The Holy Spirit in us, without seeing Him. It is sufficient for us to see His work, and to touch His Hand in our life.....

* * *

Christ is with The Church on a level which is higher than the level of the senses, and higher than the level of visible things.....we do not see Him in the body but we believe that He is with us through faith, and

“faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1)

In the Ascension of Christ, He disappeared from the sight of the Apostles.....but He did not disappear from their souls. That was an evanescence, but not a departure....It was an operation of weaning for the senses, so that the soul might be nourished through faith, and not remain under the power of the senses.

Before the maturity of the Apostles, He had permitted them to see and touch, and live depending on the bodily sensesbut after their maturity, and after the coming of The Spirit upon them, they will have then to see through faith.

It is as if He says: “ You are no more in need to see me in the body....you are now in the stage of maturity, and you see me through the spirit. And effectively, in that maturity the Apostles did not feel at all that Christ had parted from them. Let then this thought be in our hearts.

WEANING

The Ascension of the Lord to heaven was an operation of weaning for the Apostles:

During the time of their discipleship to Him when He was in the midst of them through the body, they were used to depend upon Him in everything without doing anything themselves. It was He who performed the miracles, and He who replied to those who opposed Him, while the Apostles stood as spectators; Their discipleship was merely following Him and learning from Him. They contemplated and learned.....

But then after the Ascension, it was time for them to be weaned, and to assume all the spiritual responsibilities themselves: to make disciples of all the nations, to teach them to observe all things that the Lord had commanded them (Matt. 28), to reply to those who oppose them, and to suffer pain in the work of preaching.

The weaning of the Apostles by Christ, did not at all mean that He relinquished them, but rather it meant the proclamation of their development and maturity, and their assuming responsibility.

Christ had spent forty days with His Apostles, talking to them about the things pertaining to the kingdom of God.....but He did not prolong the forty days....these were enough. Afterwards He Ascended and left them to minister. That was no surprise. But they had ten more days ahead in which to make themselves ready and to wait for the coming down of The Holy Spirit upon them.

With the forty days, the stage of preparation for the ministry ended, and the stage of faith through the senses ended.

Be mobilized then. Let every one say: “O Lord, I feel that you are with me, and I feel that Your word is in my mouth. I shall minister but not with my human nature, but

with Your Spirit, You will give me what words to speak. Then I would make miracles, but with Your power Yourself.

The Lord was like an eagle teaching the little ones how to fly.

When they grow up or when they become mature, he carries them upon his wings, then drop them in the air and flies up away from them, so that they move their wings and learn how to fly. In all this, he does not forsake them, but rather he watches them and comes to protect them if they encounter any danger.

Or like a father teaching his son how to swim. He carries him on his hands, then leaves him inside the water after having taught him how to swim, in order that he would swim alone and experience the water. Nevertheless he does not forsake him, but stays near with him, and assists him whenever he is in need.

In a similar manner, The Lord trained His Apostles during three years or more, and sent them also for a practical training (Matt. 10). Then when the training stage was finished, He ascended from them so that they would act by themselves and complete their mission, while He would be with them always, even to the end of the age.

The Ascension was the proclamation of the end of the training stage and of the beginning of the ministry.

Therefore He said to them before His Ascension:
“you shall receive power when the Holy Sprit has come upon you, and you shall be witnesses to me” (Acts 1:8).

And He said:

“Go into all the world and preach he gospel to every creature.” (Mark 16:1)

And He said also:

“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you”

(Matt. 28: 19-20).

THE ASCENSION AND GRAVITATION

Some would ask: “Did The Lord trample down the law of terrestrial gravitation?”

To answer this question, we mention two important points:

- 1. God had established the natural laws in order to submit nature to them, and not to submit Himself to them! Was there then a miracle? Here I answer:**
- 2. It was a miracle for us to see The Lord Christ ascending with His body upwards to heaven. But effectively that was something natural for the glorious body with which The Lord is risen.**

Therefore the miracle of the Ascension was not in the victory over the terrestrial laws of gravitation, rather it was in the spiritual celestial body, that could ascend upwards. It was then a sublimation of nature, and not a contradiction to it. It was a kind of transfiguration of the nature of the body.....

If it was a natural body that ascended up to heaven, we would have said that this was against laws of terrestrial gravitation. But when a spiritual celestial body ascends to heaven, that is a matter which is in accordance with the exaltation of the new nature which the body takes in the resurrection, and then becomes a spiritual body, for “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor. 15:50)

* * *

Verily, the miracle is the body of the Resurrection or the body of the Ascension.

Christ has ascended into heaven with a glorious body, going steadily upwards, not at all submitting to the laws of terrestrial gravitation.

It is a body that has not the material weight which draws downwards, but has rather another glorious nature who can ascend.

Verily, the Lord Christ is risen with a glorious body, that could go out of the tomb while it was closed, and could enter the upper room to the Apostles, while the doors were locked. (John 20: 19-26), but the Apostles were not certain about the glory of His body, because they “supposed they had seen a spirit”, and then because they handled Him, and because He condescended “and ate in their presence.” (Luke 24: 37-43)

But they entered to the depth of the faith in that glorious body during the Ascension, that attracted their sights upwards, so that the two angels said to them:

“why do you stand gazing up into heaven? (Acts 1 :11)

*** * ***

The miracle of the Ascension is the transformation of the material body into a spiritual body, a heavenly body, a glorious body, that can go upwards. That same thing will also happen to us in the Resurrection, when “we shall be glorified with Him”, we shall be “raised in incorruption”, we shall be “raised in power”, in glory.

(1Cor. 15: 52-53)

“Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.” (1 Thess. 4:17)

The Apostle announces us that the Lord “will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body” (Philippians 3:21)

meaning that we shall be raised with a glorious body.

He explains this matter in detail in the chapter of the Resurrection (1 Cor. 15), how our mortal body will “put on immortality”, and the “corruptible must put on incorruption”. We shall take off the animal body of dust, in order to put on a spiritual luminous heavenly body. (1 Cor. 15: 41-50)

* * *

Therefore the Ascension of the Lord is the pledge of our ascension.

In the same manner as the Resurrection was the pledge of our resurrection, since He is
“the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Cor. 15:20),
and

“as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive”
(1 Cor. 15: 22),

so also in the Ascension, we hear Him say:

“And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself.”

(John 12: 32)

on the clouds, and in heaven, and with a glorious body, and we shall be always with the Lord, in the heavenly Jerusalem the dwelling of God with men” (Revelation 21: 2-3) on a level that is higher than matter and higher than the senses, in the likeness of the body of His glory, among the myriads of His saints, when we shall also be glorified with Him (Rom. 8:17), when we shall be raised in glory (1 Cor. 15:43) and consequently we shall ascend to Him in glory...

We have received in the image of the Ascension, the pledge of the glorious body that is lifted up to heaven.

That still remains our hope, in that He will deliver us from matter and its outcome, and that our body will not be a material body forever, but that we shall put on the spiritual, by the redemption of our body (Rom. 8:23). But what is the way

that leads to the glory which our bodies will obtain?

The way that leads to the glory of our bodies, is first death, then resurrection.....Therefore we do not fear death. With death we get rid of the sensible body, and with resurrection we put on the spirituality of the glorious body.

If we remain in that body, we shall remain in matter, but if we take off this substance through death, we shall be qualified to the spirituality of the body in eternity. Who then among us desires to remain in dust, without being transformed into glory?!

THE SITTING AT THE RIGHT HAND OF THE FATHER

This sitting was mentioned in both the Old and the New Testaments:

In the Old Testament, we read in the psalm”
*“The Lord said to my Lord,
Sit at My right hand,
Till I make Your enemies Your footstool.”*

And here, in that sitting, He calls Him Lord, through the glory of His victory over His enemies.

And in the New Testament, the story of the Ascension in the gospel of St. Mark narrates”

*“So then, after the Lord had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God.”
(Mark 16:19)*

This sitting appeared in the story of the martyrdom of St. Stephen, the first deacon, when he said:

“Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God” (Acts 7:56).

How numerous are the references to His sitting at the right hand of The Father, in the Epistle to the Hebrews. Here

are some of them:

“ when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high having become so much better than the angels” (Hebrews 1:3-4)

see also (Heb. 8:1), and (Heb. 12:2).

Here we ask: “what is the meaning of the sitting at the right hand of The Father?”

God has neither right nor left, because He is limitless. And there is no void space at His right hand where somebody would sit, because He fills all. But the word “right hand” means power and majesty and justice, as it was said in the psalm:

*“The right hand of the Lord does valiantly,
The right hand of the Lord is exalted,
The right hand of the Lord does valiantly.” (Psalm 118: 15-16)*

The meaning is that Christ sat with the majesty and the power of The Father.

* * *

Another meaning which we understand from the Ascension:

THE END OF THE EXPRESSION: “HE MADE HIMSELF OF NO REPUTATION”

With the glorious Ascension, the expression “made Himself of no reputation” which was said about the Lord Christ, ended. (Philippians 2:7). Now He is in glory.

He had made Himself of no reputation when He incarnated “taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men.” (Philippians 2:7)

But after His Ascension, He entered in His glory, and the expression “He sat at the right hand of The Father” means that He is abiding, that He is in perpetual glory, where there is no more making of no reputation..... the making of no reputation with which He was born in a manger, and lived poorly, having nowhere to lay His head,

“A Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (Isaiah 53-3).

Therefore, when He will come in His second advent, He will come *“with power and great glory” (Matt. 24:30), (in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him” (Matt. 25:31).*

It was rather said:

“Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of His saints” (Jude 14), “and then He will reward each according to his works.” (Matt. 16:27).

Before His second coming, Saul of Tarsus saw Him in glory (Acts 9:3). And John saw Him such: “and His countenance was like the sun shining in its strength.” (Rev. 1:16)

The expression “sat” means stability and continuity, because He is eternally in glory.

In His second advent He will not come to take *away the sin of the world (John 1:29)* and *“be sin for us” (2 Cor. 5:21)* as it happened during His first coming, but He will come as absolute justice, leading the army of the righteous or the army of the victorious.

* * *

In the Ascension of The Lord to heaven, we say to Him: The earth is not the place where to lay Your head, but it is Your footstool (Matt. 5-35). Rather it is Your humility that makes it Your footstool!

Verily this earth does not deserve that Your feet tread upon it. And we are from the dust of this earth. Who then are we before You? Nothing...

By humbling ourselves like this before Him, it will be possible for us to be raised up to Him, because *“he who humbles himself will be exalted”* (Matt. 23:12).

MEDITATIONS ON THE ASCENSION

The Ascension gives the spirit of hope:

Who would have thought during the sufferings of the Cross, and what humiliations and scorn that were there, that He will end in that glory in the Resurrection and the Ascension and the sitting at the right hand of The Father?! Does not this give us the fullness of hope whenever we are surrounded by tribulations? Let us remember that after the sorrows of the Golgotha, there are the rejoicings of the Resurrection and the glories of the Ascension.

All the problem lies in that it is a matter that needs faith, confidence and patience.

There are people who are swallowed by tribulations whenever these happen to them, and their souls remain imprisoned inside the tribulations, as if there were no salvation!!

The lives of these people end in despair without hope, at the Golgotha; and if the story of Christ had ended with His crucifixion, we would have become the most miserable of men.

But we rejoice because the story of the Crucifixion was followed with the Resurrection, then the Ascension. In the Resurrection it was possible to destroy death, but Christ still remained on earth. While in the Ascension, He is raised up over the earth, in glory, to heaven.

The miracle of the Ascension gives us a kind of hope from

two sides:

The first one is meant for those who were scandalised by the Cross of our Lord and by the accompanying humiliations and sufferings, in that the riposte was first in the glory of the Resurrection, then in the glory of the Ascension. In that way, faith returned to those who had thought that everything ended with the Cross; and we have the hope that after every cross, there is resurrection and there is ascension. This hope accompanied the martyrs and the confessors in every generation.

The second side of hope is that we shall have the same:

Therefore, as Christ ascended with a glorious body, so we also shall have a glorious body (Philippians 3:21). And as a cloud took Him out of the sight of the Apostles in His Ascension, so we also shall come with Him on the clouds on the last day,

“at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints” (1 Thess. 3:13), when

“the Lord comes with ten thousands of His saints, to execute judgement on all” (Jude 14-15), when He will be

“coming with clouds, and every eye will see him” (Rev. 1:7).

“Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.” (1 Thess. 4:17)

Verily how great is that hope!.....

* * *

This hope teaches us patience and waiting for the Lord.

Patience first in the realisation of the promises of the Lord, patience in the sufferings of the cross, until the glories of the resurrection and the glories of the ascension are accomplished.

Patience in the Ascension of the Lord leaving us with the body, until the word of the two angels to the Apostles on the

day of the Ascension are fulfilled:

“This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven.”
(Acts 1:11)

Such also was the patience which our fathers the Apostles had in waiting for the promise of the Lord to send to them the Holy Spirit.

It is patience with hope. It is hope full of joy in the confidence of the fulfillment of the promises of the Lord, as the Apostle said: *“rejoicing in hope”* (Romans 12:12).

* * *

The Ascension of the Lord implied three promises:

The first promise is the sending of the Holy Spirit to remain with us eternally. Thus He said to them in advance:

“Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you, but if I depart, I will send Him to you.” (John 16:7)

And so it happened; and He sent to them the Holy Spirit ten days after His Ascension.

As for the second promise, it is His word to them:

“I will not leave you orphans, I will come to you.” (John 14:18)

And His word also:

“I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” (Matt. 28:20)

He fulfilled this promise also, and is still fulfilling it.

The beloved Saint John saw Him in the midst of the seven churches, (Apoc. 1: 13-14), holding the angels of the seven churches “or their pastors”, in His right hand.

As for the third promise, it is His word to His Apostles:

“And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself.” (John 12:32)

He draws us to Himself in order to lift us up to heaven, as

He said:

“I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also.” (John 14: 2-3)

Consequently, it is a promise that we shall be with Him, on earth and in heaven. On earth:

“I am with you always”, and “For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.” (Matt. 18:20)

And in heaven:

“that where I am, there you may be also.” (John 14:3)

And as the Apostle saint Paul said:

“Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.” (1 Thess. 4:17)

How great is that glory!.....

* * *

He said to His Apostles:

“that where I am, there you may be also.” (John 14:3)

Not on earth, but in heaven. However on earth, prepare yourself in order to be in heaven.

I was with you when I made Myself of no reputation, and you will be with Me when I enter into My glory.

Whoever can conceive this truth, and that he will be with the Lord in the likeness of a glorious body, will indubitably respect his soul, and will not debase his soul with sin, but rather he will prepare his soul to inherit the kingdom.

This glory with the Lord on the clouds and in heaven, will not be inherited by those who cling to dust, to material matters, to the earth, and those who love the world.

* * *

SOME ADVICES ON THE OCCASION OF THE ASCENSION

In the uplifting of the Lord to heaven, He has drawn our sights and our hearts also to heaven:

Therefore it was said about the Ascension of the Lord to heaven that the Apostles:

“looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up” (Acts 1:10).

That is one of the heavenly lessons to us, that we should be steadfastly looking toward heaven where the Lord has ascended, and to heaven from where He will come to us in His second advent. Also we should be steadfastly looking toward heaven where all our emotions and our hopes are concentrated all the time, in His heavenly kingdom, as the Lord said:

*“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”
(Matt. 6:21)*

Those people who have all their treasures on earth, are poor, and therefore all their desires and all their hopes will be on earth. And when they leave the earth, they will not find anything.

As for the sons of God, they live always looking steadfastly toward heaven to which their hearts and all their desires cling.

May therefore our thoughts be always lifted up toward heaven.

They all mount there to be with the Lord, together with all the desires of our hearts and all our spiritual senses. And as the saint Apostle Paul said:

“while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are

temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.” (2 Cor. 4:18)

If we remain looking steadfastly toward heaven, looking to the things which are not seen, and all our treasure has become in heaven, then we shall say with the Apostle:

“having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better.” (Philippians 1:23)

In the Feast of the Ascension, our thoughts must be lifted upwards, to contemplate the heavens to which Christ has ascended, and His sitting at the right hand of The Father.

In our contemplation of the heavens, we remember the word of the Lord:

*“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”
(Matt. 6:21)*

Let your treasure therefore be in heaven; and may every person train himself to the blessing of the Ascension in his life; being lifted up from the material level to the spiritual level. His aspirations and his desires would be lifted up from the level of the body to the love of God.

Whoever, with his heart and his thought, is lifted up from the level of the earth and material things, himself will deserve to ascend and to be with Christ.

But those who cling to the earth and to material things, how can they ascend?

It is clear, even from the material point of view: whenever a man is lifted up, the earth becomes small in his sight, and all the things in it are belittled, till they become as if they were nothing.

* * *

The Feast of the Ascension teaches us also the principle of ascending.

Spiritual life, or life with the Lord, is a perpetual ascension, a constant development upwards, till we arrive at

the life of perfection. It is a continuous relationship to heaven.

The church tower gives us an idea about the direction upwards, toward heaven, and the ascension over the level of the earth and earthly things.

THE CONTEMPLATION OF GOD'S GLORY

Also in the Ascension of The Lord, we can meditate on His magnificence and His glory.

The glory of Christ in His Ascension, was a reply to all those who were scandalized during His Crucifixion.

Those who were mocking saying:

“If He is the King of Israel, let Him now come down from the cross, and we believe Him.” (Matt. 27: 40-43)

His Ascension also invigorated the faith of the Apostles who were afraid during the time of His crucifixion and His arrest. The glory of Christ in His Ascension was a reply to the Jews who saw the Cross as a stumbling block, and to the Greeks who saw the Cross as foolishness. As for us who believe in the Ascension, we see the power of God in the Cross. (1Cor. 1:23)

The Ascension was an affirmation of the glory of Christ, which they had seen on the mount of the Transfiguration, and forgotten.

Consequently we give credence to, not only The Christ who was born in a manger for cattle, but also to The Christ who ascended on the clouds to heaven. We believe also, not only Jesus who was crucified, but also we believe Him sitting at the right hand of His Father, on the throne of magnificence in the highest.

Thus we have a complementary idea of Christ, Nativity, Crucifixion, concluded with the glories of The Transfiguration,

The Resurrection and The Ascension.

Many people take the love of God, His humility, His lowliness of heart and His forgiveness, as subjects for mediation. And that is good and useful. Are then any spiritual benefits whenever we meditate on the glory and magnificence of God? Undoubtedly, for they are many sources of spiritual matters.

1. The contemplation of the glory of God, leads us to deference.

Some people may be led by their unbridled feelings of love, to a lack of reverence, saying every time they are unrestrained and conscienceless, that God is very compassionate and sympathetic, and undoubtedly He will forgive; as if forgiveness had no conditions of repentance and subservience. We are in need of the feelings of veneration, whenever we contemplate the glory and magnificence of God..... the Boundless, the Inconceivable, who is the unapproachable Light, to whom angels and archangels bow down, and worship Him... whom the cherubims and the seraphims venerate: covering their faces with two wings, and covering their feet with two wings....The Ascension plants inside us feelings of deference.

The Jews exploited the love and the forbearance of God, in a wrong manner. They exploited the modesty of Christ in order to insult Him and to crucify Him. It was indispensable for everybody to know the glory of the Lord in order to believe in Him. This glory appeared in the Ascension and in many visions.

2. And also the glory of God plants reverence and obedience in us.

And we are in need of both of them, because without both of them, we are unable to reach the perfect love that “casts out fear” (1 John 4:18); and without both of them we cannot reach the purity of heart with which we shall

see God (Matt. 5:8).

Fear is the beginning of wisdom, and the beginning of the spiritual way. Because those in whom the fear of God does not exist, may be guided to consciencelessness, and indifference, and consequently sin with impertinence.

The glory of God leads to apprehension; and this leads to the life of prudence and circumspection, and to purity and repentance.

Such as we see the kind-hearted Christ entering into Jerusalem seated on “a colt, the foal of a donkey”, we see Him also on the clouds, in order to think of Him as it is befitting.

The loving merciful compassionate God who speaks to the prophet Elijah in a lightsome low voice, is Himself the same God sitting on the cherubims, walking on the wings of the winds, from whose dreadful glory the angels cover their faces.

* * *

While we mention His glory in the Ascension, we remember the word of saint Nicodemus:

“No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven.”

(John 3:13)

So, heaven is not something new to Him in His Ascension, rather it is His original habitat; and in the same manner His sitting at the right hand of The Father.

Therefore He said to His Apostles:

“I came forth from the Father and have come into the world. Again, I leave the world and go to the Father.”

(John 16:28)

Thus pertaining to His true magnificence and His being the Son of God, all have comprehended His

humility and His making himself of no reputation.

* * *

**3. This contemplation plants in our hearts,
some deep feelings, We mention:**

1. We feel at rest and confident, being at the care of such a magnificent God, and all contradictory majesty being worthless. Thus we are assured of His promise:

“and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it”

(Matt. 16:18),

and His word to the Church:

“No weapon formed against you shall prosper”

(Isaiah 54:17),

and His words to saint Paul:

“Do not be afraid, but speak, and do not keep silent; for I am with you, and no one will attack you to hurt you” (Acts 18: 9-10).

2. The contemplation of the magnificence of the Lord, leads us to the life of humility and to the praise of God. Who are we in the presence of Him who ascends to heaven, who is sitting at the right hand of the Father (Psalm 110:1) (Acts 7:56) (Heb.1:3) who *“charges His angels with error” (Job 4:18),*

“the stars are not pure in his sight” (Job 25:50).

Then our souls become lowly and we learn to be humble; and when we contemplate the magnificence of the Lord in His Ascension to heaven and His sitting at the right hand of the Father, we confidently say to Him:

O Lord, Heaven is your throne to which you have ascended (Matt. 5:34),

*“Your throne, O God, is forever and ever,
A scepter of righteousness is the scepter of Your kingdom.”
(Heb. 1:8)*

As for us, we are dust. It is Your great love that attracts us to You, to be with You and with Your angels. Verily You are Him who

*“raises the poor out of the dust,
And lifts the needy out of the ash heap,
That He may seat him with princes,
With the princes of His people.”
(Psalm 113:7)*

In the story of the Ascension, we need to imagine a little from the glory of God, and to fear Him, in order to become lowly before Him and be humiliated, since we are dust and ashes.

Therefore we lift our sights to heaven during our prayers, and pray our Father who is in heaven, although He is everywhere. But the expression “who is in heaven” reminds us of His glory, and reminds us of Christ who ascended to heaven.

Thus we remember God the Powerful, the Supreme, whose throne is heaven, and whose footstool is the earth (Matt. 5: 34-35). Our lowliness during prayer, in front of the magnificence of God, is very useful to us.

THE TEN DAYS

In the Ascension, we meditate on the virtue of waiting for the Lord, like the Apostles who had waited for ten days.

Christ ascended to heaven and promised the coming of the Holy Spirit to the Apostles. They kept waiting for ten days, in which they did not see the Lord with them, and the Holy Spirit had not come to them. But they were certain of the divine promise.

The spiritual person waits confidently, as it has been said

in the psalm:

*“Wait on the Lord,
Be of good courage,
An He shall strengthen your heart;
Wait, I say, on the Lord.”*

(Psalm 27:14)

Be confident that the ten days in which the Apostles had waited, were for their good. It was a holy period of preparation to the coming of the Holy Spirit in their heart.

*Pope Shenouda III
series of pamphlets
1*

*The Transfiguration
and some meditations
upon the feast of the Transfiguration*

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His Holiness Pope Shenouda III
Pope and Patriarch of the See of Alexandria and of all the
Predication of the Evangelist St. Mark

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
the One God, Amen

You will read in this pamphlet about:

The Transfiguration of our Lord Jesus-Christ and its
theological signification.

The transfiguration of Moses and Eliah and its pointing
to the transfiguration of the human nature.

The transfiguration of our nature in the Resurrection,
and its transfiguration here on earth.

The relation between the Transfiguration and the gifts.

The relation between the Transfiguration and the
promises of God.

PREFACE

What is the story of these pamphlets?

Many people are inclined to read concise writings, more than what they read in big books.

Therefore we have seen to publish for you these pamphlets, in a single bunch of the small size.

They will be published in the weeks when the Kiraza magazine will not appear, and in the weeks when no big books will be published.

The price is insignificant and less than the price of a daily newspaper.

We present to you, dear reader, this first pamphlet, about the Transfiguration, on the occasion of the feast of the Transfiguration.

Pope Shenouda III

August 1996

We congratulate all of you for the feast of the Transfiguration, which is one of the Lord's feasts, and the Church celebrates it on the 13th of the month of Misra, which is the 19th of the month of August. The story of the Transfiguration is mentioned in the holy Gospel (Mark and Luke).

THE STORY OF THE TRANSFIGURATION

According to the gospel of the apostle saint Mark, the story of the Transfiguration was mentioned like this:

[Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John, and led them up on a high mountain apart by themselves, and He was transfigured before them. His clothes became shining, exceedingly white, like snow, such as no launderer on earth can whiten them. And Elijah appeared to them with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus. Then Peter answered and said to Jesus: "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; and let us make three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah", because he did not know what to say, for they were greatly afraid. And a cloud came and overshadowed them; and a voice came out of the cloud, saying: "This is My beloved Son, hear Him!" Suddenly, when they had looked around, they saw no one anymore, but only Jesus with themselves.] (Mark 9: 2-8).

And in the narration of the apostle saint Luke, he added saying: "And behold, two men talked with Him, who were Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of His decease which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. But Peter and those with him were heavy with sleep, and when they were fully awake, they saw His glory and the two men who stood with Him" (Luke 9: 30-32).

THE GLORY AND DIVINITY OF CHRIST

The expression "glory" is mentioned more than once in the gospel of Luke.

As regards His divinity, it is evident in that in a moment, He was transfigured to this illuminating brightful aspect, whose brightness was magnificent..... and about which it was said: "His clothes became shining, exceedingly white, like snow, such as no launderer on earth can whiten them" (Mark 6:2).

His divinity is also evident in the manner of His capacity to bring Elijah and Moses to be present with Him.....

In how He brought them with Him.....! in how they spoke with Him.....! and suddenly disappeared.....!

In His sudden appearance, and His sudden disappearance! How did they come with Him in a moment?! And how did they disappear in a moment?! Where did they come from?! And where did they go to?!

Yes, how was Christ the Lord able to bring Elijah, body and soul, from that place which we do not know, since he was elevated alive to heaven in a chariot of fire, out of the earth. (2 Kings 2:11). And we do not know to what place in heaven!

His calling Elijah to stand with Him on the mount of the Transfiguration, then his dismissal in a single moment, undoubtedly that refers to the power of His divinity.....

Then, how could He bring the soul of Moses, who was dead and buried, and "no one knows his grave to this day" (Deut. 34:6). It is known that the prophets and the righteous of the Old Testament were, before the Redemption, lying on hope, in their place of waiting "into the lower parts of the earth" (Eph. 4:9).

There is no doubt also that the calling of Elijah happened according to the power of His divinity.

The Lord willed to show to his disciples that He had put on this human body, simply out of His humility, and His self-abnegation.

But at that time, they did not understand His divine nature.

This glorious transfiguration was supposed to establish an equilibrium in the moral condition of the apostles when they will see the Lord at the time of His crucifixion, in an aspect which the prophet Isaiah described saying: "He has no form or comeliness; and when we see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him" (Is. 53:2).

All this is added to the testimony of the Father for Him, with a voice which they heard out of the cloud which overshadowed them, saying: "This is My beloved Son. Hear Him!" (Mark 9:7), (Luke 9:35).

This testimony of the Father was heard during the baptism of repentance when the Lord humbled Himself "(Matt. 3:17), (Luke 2:23). And this testimony was also heard during the glory of the Transfiguration.....

He is the beloved Son, whether in His humility or in His glory.....

GRADATION IN THE TRANSFIGURATION

The Lord Christ took steps in the revelation of His nature's transfiguration, even toward His saint apostles.

This Transfiguration on the mount of Tabor, was the simplest image of His Transfiguration, in spite of its magnificence and its glory, in its light and in the testimony of the Father from the cloud.

Another kind of the Lord's transfiguration was in His resurrection and His ascension.

That glorious Resurrection in which He rised with a glorious body, and was able to come out of the tomb while it was closed, and was able to enter to the apostles while the doors were closed (John 20:19), in a calm way that would not terrify them.

His ascension to heaven with a body that is over the level of the earth gravitation, is like His transfiguration". He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight ... while they looked steadfastly toward heaven" (Acts 1: 9-10). Our instructor the apostle saint Mark says about that: "So then, after the Lord had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God" (Mark 16:19).

This transfiguration in the resurrection and the ascension, happened in a manner which amazed them and made them feel His divinity, but it did not terrify them.....

But we see a frightful aspect in which the Lord appeared in the vision which the apostle saint John saw. It was said that: "His eyes (were) like a flame of fire and His voice as the sound of many waters out of His mouth went a sharp two-edged sword, and His countenance was like the sun shining in its strength" (Apoc. 1: 14-16); to such a degree, that saint John, who is one of the three who saw the transfiguration on mount Tabor, could not bear this transfiguration with which the Lord appeared in the vision. Therefore he said: "I fell at His feet as dead" (Apoc. 1:17), the thing that made the Lord say to him: "Do not be afraid" that is the disciple who "was leaning on Jesus' bosom" (John 13: 23-25).

The last transfiguration will be in His second coming when "the Lord comes with ten thousands of His saints" (Jude 14), "when He comes in His own glory, and in His Father's and of the holy angels" (Luke 9:26), He "will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works" (Matt. 16:27), "When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats" (Matt. 25: 31-32).

Verily the two expressions "His glory" and "His Father's glory" are overbearing to our understanding and our imagination!!

Do they mean the glory of His divinity?! Undoubtedly not. Because these peoples would not have been able to stand before Him and also

because He said: "When the Son of Man comes in His glory" (Matt. 25:31). And also "For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels" (Matt. 16:27). And also He said: "For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, of him the Son of Man will be ashamed when He comes in his own glory, and His Father's" (Luke 9:26).

Therefore in the words of these expressions of glory, He speaks about the Son of Man, that is about His glory in His incarnation, meaning the transfiguration into glory of the nature of "the incarnated Word"

.....when He comes upon the clouds of heaven, in His second coming, to judge the living and the dead. As if He were saying to His disciples:

"Let not My humility in My incarnation, make you doubt of My divinity.

In spite of having "made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man....." (Philippians 2: 7-8), nevertheless sometimes it was possible for Him to be "transfigured before them" (Mark 9:2), manifesting His divinity.....

This is as regards the Lord Christ, what then is it as regards us?

His Transfiguration was the firstfruits of the transfiguration of our human nature.

We say, in the Gregorian mass, about that: "You have blessed my nature in You" Yes He has blessed it with the glory which He has given to it.

WITH MOSES AND ELIJAH

Christ our Lord was not alone on the mount of the Transfiguration, but there were with Him, Moses and Elijah who appeared in glory (Luke 9:31).

It is evident here that the Lord does not refuse His glory to His sons.

It was said in the epistle to the Romans: "For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son these He also glorified" (Romans 8: 29-30).

The Lord said about His disciples to the Father: "And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one" (John 17:22).

We note that each one of the three who were in glory on the mount of Transfiguration, had fasted forty days.

Probably this indicates that transfiguration is related to keeping away from material things.

It is known that the Lord Christ fasted forty days and forty nights (Matt. 4:2).

And Moses fasted forty days, when he was with God on the mountain to receive the Law from Him. "And Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights" (Ex. 24:18).

And Elijah, when the angel of the Lord appeared to him and said: [Arise and eat, because the journey is too great for you". So he arose, and ate and drank; and he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights as far as Horeb, the mountain of God" (1 Kings 19: 7-8).

Moses and Elijah in their transfiguration, symbolised the whole human nature.

Likewise we note that in the parable of the ten foolish and wise virgins (Matt. 25:1), that the five wise virgins symbolised all the wise human beings in their virtuous way of life; and similarly the five foolish virgins symbolised all the human beings who do not, in their ignorance, prepare themselves for their eternal life and for meeting God.

In the same way the Lord gave us His Transfiguration with Moses and Elijah, as a symbol of the transfiguration which the Lord will grant to all human beings in eternity.

The variety which is represented by the two prophets Moses and Elijah:

1. Elijah represents the virgins (of either sex), and Moses represents the married. Rather Moses married more than once. He married Zipporah the daughter of the priest of Midian (Ex. 2: 19-22). He also married an Ethiopian woman (Num. 12:1), who was a symbol of the acceptance of the Gentiles.

All this is a symbol, because the transfiguration will equally be the destiny of the virgins and the married.

In the same manner, we find around the cross of the Lord: the Holy Virgin Mary, and the virgin apostle John. Likewise we find Mary Magdalene, and Mary the wife of Cleopas and mother of Joses, Judah, and Simeon.

2. Moses represented those who were dead. And Elijah represented the living who have not yet died. That would symbolise, in the second coming of Christ, the dead who will rise, and the living who will be lifted up to the clouds, as saint Paul said in (1Thess.4:15-17):

"For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord."

All will be with the Lord those who were buried in the earth and remained under the earth until the day of the resurrection (John 5:29), and those who will be raised up to heaven as Elijah was raised up.

3. Elijah represents those who have lived a life of ascetism in the mountains, as he was himself on the mountain of Carmel; and Moses represents those who have lived in the world with their families in a social life.

4. One of them represents the life of monks, and the other represents the ministry and the guidance of crouds.

One of them is in the style of Mariam, and the other is in the style of Martha, with the difference in measuring all of these two kinds will be transfigured with the Lord

5. Some have said that Moses represents the Law, and Elijah represents the prophets; because Moses presented the Law, or the Judicial procedure, to the people, while Elijah was one of the prophets.

6. Moses represents meekness; and Elijah represents the fiery jealousy. The one represents forgiveness, and the other represents punishment

It was said about the prophet Moses that he: "was very humble, more than all men who were on the face of the earth" (Num. 12:3). It was Moses who interceded for the people when the Lord wanted to destroy them, saying: "Lord, why does Your wrath burn hot against Your people whom You have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians speak, and say: " He brought them out to harm them, to kill them in the mountain s, and to consume them from the face of the earth? Turn from Your fierce wrath, and relent from this harm to Your people" (Ex. 32: 11-12). He said also likewise: "Yet now, if You will forgive their sin, but if not, I pray, blot me out of Your book which You have written" (Ex. 32:32).

But Elijah was the fiery man who said to each of the two captains of fifty: "If I am a man of God, let fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty men" (2 Kings 1: 10,12). Likewise it was he who ordered the slaughter of the prophets of Baal and the prophets of

Asherah (1 Kings 18:40). It is he who said in his flaming anger: "there shall not be dew nor rain these years, except at my word" (1 Kings 17:1). Yes, he is Elijah who reprimanded king Achab and said to him: "I have not troubled Israel, but you and your father's house have, in that you have forsaken the commandments of the Lord and have followed the Baals" (1Kings 18;18).

From this, we understand that both those who are meek, and those who are strong and firm, God will grant all of them the transfiguration in eternity, according to their kind.....

As if Christ our Lord says: "I shall assemble all of them to me in the transfiguration":

Him who was married, and him who was a virgin; him who lived the life of meditation, and him who lived the life of service; him who was meek and calm, and him who was firm and strong; him who lived on the mountain, and him who lived in the city. The important thing is that they live a life of righteousness All the kinds of righteous people are fit for the kingdom and will be transfigured in it, in spite of the difference in kind. Some were meek and interceded for the culprits for the sake of God; and some others were firm and strong and purified the earth from idolatry, and chastised the sinners in order to bring them to repentance, for the sake of God.

Although Moses represented one kind of righteous, and Elijah represented another kind, both of them participated in some qualities:

Each of them was a prophet to God. Each of them offered sacrifices to God. Each of them was holy and loved God and His kingdom, and was a man of God.

Each of them was a man of miracles: The prophet Moses divided the waters of the Red Sea (Exode 14); and brought down the manna and the quails from heaven for the people (Exode 16); and stroke the rock, and water sprang from it (Exode 17).

The prophet Elijah resurrected the son of the widow of Zarephath which belongs to Sidon, from death. He blessed the flour and the oil in the house of this widow, and they were sufficient during all the period of the famine. (1 Kings 17). He is the one who brought down rain by his prayer (1 Kings 18). He is the one who brought down fire from heaven, and it consumed the two captains and their fifties. (2 Kings 1).

Each one of both of them was courageous in his censure of a delinquent king. The prophet Moses rebuked Pharaoh, king of Egypt. Elijah rebuked Achab, king of Israel. (1 Kings 18: 18-19). He censured him likewise for the killing of Naboth the Jezreelite, and he warned him saying: "In the place where dogs licked the blood of Naboth, dogs shall

lick your blood, even yours"; and he said to him: "you have sold yourself to do evil in the sight of the Lord" (1 Kings 21: 19,20).

Each one of both of them was a cause of salvation for the people in his days. The prophet Moses delivered the people from the bondage to Pharaoh. The prophet Elijah delivered them from the famine, and participated in their salvation from idolatry.

Each one of both of them had spiritual experiences in the life of the mountains: The prophet Moses remained with God forty days on the mount Horeb. The prophet Elijah had his spiritual experience on the mount Carmel.

God also glorified both of them. The Lord said about the prophet Moses while He was reprimanding Aaron and Mariam because they had spoke against him: "If there is a prophet among you, I, the Lord, make Myself known to him in a vision; I speak to him in a dream. Not so with My servant Moses; he is faithful in all My house. I speak with him face to face, even plainly, and not in dark sayings; and he sees the form of the Lord" (Num. 12: 6-8). He glorified him likewise in many wonders and miracles. He rather said to him: "See, I have made you as God to Pharaoh, and Aaron your brother shall be your prophet" (Ex. 7:1).

The Lord also dignified Elijah with the miracles, and likewise by lifting him alive to heaven in a chariot of fire: "suddenly a chariot of fire appeared with horses of fire, and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven" (2 Kings 2:11).

Each one of both of them was exposed to fear. Moses was frightened at the beginning of his life when he had killed the Egyptian man, and then he ran away from the face of Pharaoh (Ex. 2: 14-15). Elijah ran away from the face of the queen Jezabel; and he said to the Lord, in an attempt to justify his flight: "the children of Israel killed Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they seek to take my life" (1 Kings 19:14).

I would like to say on this occasion, that the prophet Elijah is not John the Baptist, as those who believe in reincarnation say.

Because Elijah did not die, and his soul did not go out of his body in order to return to incarnation in the person of John the Baptist. Likewise when they asked John the Baptist saying: ["Are you Elijah?" He said: "I am not"] (John 1:21). John the Baptist was a well known personality in that time. If he had appeared with the Lord on the mount of the Transfiguration, the apostles would have recognised him, and Peter would not have said: "Lord, it is good for us to be here, if You wish, let us make here three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah" (Matt. 17:4).

THE TRANSFIGURATION OF OUR HUMAN NATURE

The Lord who has taken the weakness of our human nature, blessed this nature, and will grant to it transfiguration and glory in the resurrection. In this matter, the apostle said about our Lord Jesus- Christ:

"who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body" (Philippians 3:21).

What is it then that will happen to that human body in the resurrection? The apostle says:

"So also is the resurrection of the dead. The body is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body" (1 Cor. 15: 42-44).

"And as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly Man" (1 Cor. 15:49).

"for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality". Death will then be transformed into victory, and we shall say: "O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?!" (1 Cor. 15: 52-55).

"Then human beings will be "like angels of God in heaven" (Matt. 22:30), as the Lord has said.

Our glorified body in the resurrection, will be a body that does not hunger nor thirst, nor get tired nor become ill, nor will die nor will be corrupted; but rather will be elevated upward in the transfiguration of the human nature.

How will be the new nature of our bodies that will become spiritual heavenly bodies?!

Will they move as the angels who pass on from heaven to earth in the twinkle of an eye? Will they possess the spiritual perception instead of the ordinary vision?

How will they eat from the hidden manna as the Lord promised (Apoc. 2:17)? And how will they "eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God"? (Apoc. 2:7).

And what are the "white garments" in which they will be clothed in eternity? (Apoc. 3:5).

And how will they sit with the Son on His throne, as He also sat down with His Father on His throne? (Apoc. 3:21).

Hence the transfiguration of our bodies in the resurrection is marvelous! And our spiritual heavenly nature will be marvelous, far away from the nature of flesh and blood.

And when our human nature will be transfigured in eternity, it will not be transfigured only in the body

but also in the soul.....

There will be no weakness in the soul, as before, when the soul weakened and submitted to the body. And as we say now in the prayer of the third hour: "Deliver us from the impurity of the body and the soul". And as we say in the prayer of the divine mass: "Purify our souls, our bodies, and our spirits". Because the soul becomes impure when it submits to the body and when it participates with it in its faults and its desires. But in the resurrection, the soul becomes transfigured. How is that?

There will be laid upon her the crown of righteousness.

That about which the apostle saint Paul said: "Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing" (2 Tim. 4:8).

The meaning of the crown of righteousness is, that the human being will afterwards commit no more sin .

Neither the soul will commit sin, nor the body will commit sin.....

The human nature will become infallible, because it will have been crowned with righteousness.....

It will have become like the angels of God in heaven, not sinning. And the word of the apostle saint John about whomever is borne of God that "he cannot sin", will apply to them.

In the transfiguration of the soul, not only it will not sin, for that is a negative side! But what will it be from the positive side?

What will be its knowledge for example? Here is the apostle saying: "Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known" (1 Cor. 13:12). What then will be the knowledge of the soul after having got rid of the fog from the surrounding matter? Will the word of the Lord in His conversation with the Father be applied to them: "And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God....." (John 17:3)?

How will the soul grow in knowledge, and in the love of God, and in joining Him, and in the relation with the angels and the saints' souls? How will it be transfigured in its light? What glory will it obtain?

Undoubtedly, it will return to the image and the resemblance of God as it was created in the beginning (Gen. 1: 26-27), but far away from union with material things.

That is the transfiguration of the human nature, when it will be lifted up over the level of material things, and also over the level of the participation with flesh and blood, "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Cor. 15:50).

Thus is the human nature in transfiguration: when it enters into the perpetual spiritual life, and in the spiritual pleasure which is the property of the sons of God.

God will give man a kind of transfiguration in his nature, whether as regards the body or as regards the soul. We should like here to give some examples in order to explain the transfiguration in a simple manner.

SOME EXAMPLES OF TRANSFIGURATION

An evident example: the three young men in the fiery burning furnace.

When they cast Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego bound in the midst of the fiery burning furnace, this latter was exceedingly heated, to the point that the flame killed the men who took up these three young men" (Dan. 3: 22-23).

In spite of that, they saw the three young men who were not hurt and walking in the fire. "and they saw these men on whose bodies the fire had no power; the hair of their head was not singed nor were their garments affected, and the smell of fire was not on them" (Dan. 3: 25-27).

How then did that happen? Verily the fourth was with them, He that was said of Him: "and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God" (Dan. 3:26). He had kept them from the fire, and it had no power over them. But how is that?

He gave to their bodies a kind of transfiguration, so that fire would have no power over them.

That is quite evident, because if their bodies were at that time in the same ordinary material nature which is consumed by fire, it would have been possible for the fire to consume them. But they were given that transfiguration in which they became unconsumable.

But the transfiguration of the bodies of the three young men was for a time.

That is for a definite period, which is the period when they were inside the fiery furnace. But when they came out of it, their bodies returned to their natural position.

That is of course something else than the transfiguration of our bodies in eternity, where they will perpetually be spiritual incorruptible bodies. That is not intended to mean that we shall take other bodies, but they will be the same bodies, but with another nature. They will take from God, a power, and some characteristics which will be superior to material things.

We present another example, which is coal that has been heated with fire:

A piece of black coloured coal, that would make dirty any hand which touches it, because of the fine dust which it leaves upon his fingers. When it is burned with fire, we see that it is sparkling, and it becomes illuminating, and its colour becomes red, like the colour of fire, and that it has lost its blackness, and whoever touches it will burn his fingers because of its heat.

That is a kind of transfiguration for the piece of coal. It did not lose its carbonic nature, but with this transfiguration, it took some other characteristics, among which are sparkling, heat, and the disappearance of the black colour.....

A similar example to a certain point, is iron when it is heated by fire.....

It is the same iron in its nature, but it gains some other characteristics because of its union with fire, as regards heat, the change of colour, the possibility to be beaten and turned into different forms. It obtains some transfiguration which removes it far away from its black image.

Another example is oil in a lamp:

It is the same oil. Its nature has not changed. But with a stick of matches, it is transformed into fire and light, and becomes a source of illumination. Is not that a kind of transfiguration?! It has not the same form as before, but rather it is transfigured into a light that illuminates.....

OTHER KINDS OF TRANSFIGURATION

We have mentioned before, that the human nature obtains a kind of transfiguration in the general resurrection, when it will be clothed with spiritual heavenly incorruptible bodies, and human beings will become like the angels of God in heaven. But there are some kinds of transfiguration which happen here in life upon the earth, among which there is:

The transfiguration of thinking.

Sometimes thinking is lucid and bright, bringing out extremely ravishing thoughts. That happens to a poet whose imagination and thinking becomes radiant in writing a poem of verse; or to a writer who composes a story or a novel while he is at the top of his creative capacity, in a state of transfiguration, in the depth of intelligence, and the depth of imagination.....

These are kinds of transfiguration in the fields of many arts and gifts.

It happens to an artist, or a designer, or a sculptor, or a musician, or a poet, or a novelist. Any one of these gifted people presents a marvelous masterpiece whose author is then described that he was in a state of transfiguration in his feelings and senses and thinking, during the production.

All these cases may be for a moment, during the production and the fabrication, and may be representing a case of perpetual transfiguration of gifts, and may appear even in infancy.

Yes, undoubtedly, gifts are transfigurations which God grants to man.

Because gifts are extraordinary capabilities that God gives. They are of many kinds which the apostle saint Paul mentioned in the twelfth chapter of his first epistle to the Corinthians saying:

"But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all: for to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, to another the word of knowledge through the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the same Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another discerning of spirits, to another different kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills" (1 Cor. 12: 7-11).

A human being may be transfigured as regards certain definite spiritual qualities.

In human touches which he possesses, and which have a singular characteristic as regards their realisation; in mercy for instance or tenderness or commiseration, or the forgiveness of offenders. As we read about that in some stories about the saint Amba Abram, the bishop of Fayoum, or the saint Amba Sarabamoun, the bishop of Menoufiah, or the saint Amba Roueiss.

This transfiguration may appear in the thoughts or the responses of some saints, as it was mentioned in the words of the saint Amba Antonios, or the sayings of many fathers, which were registered in "the Paradise of the Monks" Words at which, man stands amazed, and meditates upon their depth, and says: "Undoubtedly, this was a case of transfiguration in which the fathers pronounced what they said, so that the generations have preserved their words.....!"

The case of transfiguration could be one of the great works of grace in man.

As the apostle saint Paul said: ", "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me" (1 Cor. 15:10).

Extraordinary capabilities and gifts are transfigured in man as a result of the work of grace.

His image is granted a form that amazes those who see him as a result of transfiguration.

It was said about saint Stephanos in the story of his martyrdom, that during his trial before the congregation of the Jews:

"And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel" (Acts 6:15).

Sometimes it happens during certain dreams that we see a person whom we know, in a wonderful image or in a lightful form, although we did not see him like that in his earthly life. But he appears to you during the dream in a state of transfiguration.

THE TRANSFIGURATION IS THE PLEDGE OF THE KINGDOM

All the cases of transfiguration on the earth, whether for a moment or in a perpetual way, are nothing but the pledge of the eternal transfiguration in the kingdom..... They are a kind of tasting the kingdom, and the gifts of the richness of the glory of God.....

In the story of the Transfiguration, we note the amazement of Peter with what he had seen on earth.

Then he said his well-known expression: "Lord, it is good for us to be here, if You wish, let us make here three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah" (Matt. 17:4). But Christ our Lord did not agree with him about that.....

It is not good that we be here on earth, and that we make for ourselves tabernacles to live in that material world What you see, O Peter, is simply a taste of the pleasures in eternity..... in heaven, in the spiritual heavenly body. Enjoy then the scene of transfiguration which you see. But let your thoughts be in what will be, which is far more magnificent.

Therefore it was said about the words which Peter said: "because he did not know what to say" (Mark 9:6).....!

THE FEAST OF THE TRANSFIGURATION

We are happy to celebrate the feast of the transfiguration, and we consider it one of the Lord's feasts in the Church. We are glad with it not only simply for the Transfiguration of Christ on mount Tabor, but we are the more glad for the transfiguration which will be in eternity, and the gifts which we will obtain in it, like the angels of God in heaven.

It is not profitable to consider the feast of the Transfiguration as regards the events which happened in it, but rather as regards its symbols and meanings.

With this we come to the depth of the feast, and the depth of its meanings.....

With this, we will have spiritual meditations in transfiguration:

As regards the Transfiguration of the Lord, and His divinity in the Transfiguration.

As regards the transfiguration of Moses and Elijah as a pledge of the transfiguration of humanity.

As regards the transfiguration of the human nature after the resurrection.

The transfiguration which we obtain on earth, and the relation between that and the gifts of the Spirit.

The Christ our Lord was transfigured on the mount of Tabor before three of his disciples, and with Him there were two of His prophets who "spoke of His decease which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem" (Luke 9:31).

As for the permanent transfiguration, it will be in the heavenly Jerusalem, where God will be in the midst of His people, in Jerusalem, "coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (Apoc. 21: 1-4) where God will make everything new. Yes. "Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus!" (Apocalypse 22:20).