A Patristic Commentary



The Book of Luke

Fr. Tadros Y. Malaty

https://coptic-treasures.com/

+

10 / 19 / 2013

A COMMENTARY ON

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST. LUKE

BY

HEGOMEN FR. TADROS Y. MALATY

TRANSLATED TO ENGLISH BY

DR. GEORGE BOTROS

AN INTRODUCTION

+ The word “Luke”, most probably is short of the Latin word ‘Lucanus’ or ‘Lucius’, meaning (Bearer of the light), or (the enlightened). Yet, we should discern between the Evangelist ‘Luke’ and ‘Lucius’ mentioned in the Book of Acts 13: 1; and ‘Lucius’ mentioned in the Epistle to the Romans 6: 21.

+ He is the only one among the authors of the New Testament who was not a Jew, but a Gentile, most probably from Antioch, Syria, who received the Christian faith without being a Jew first. This is based on that when the apostle Paul referred to him in his epistle to the Colossians 4: 14, he did not mention him among the circumcised (4: 10, 11), like ‘Aristarchus and Mark, the nephew of Barnabas, and Jesus who is called Justus.

+ According to some, he was one of the 70 disciples, and even one of the two whom the Lord Jesus encountered after his resurrection on their way to Emmaus (Luke 24: 12); and the apostle did not mention his name out of the spirit of humility. Yet, the most accepted among the recent scholars is that he was not one of the apostles, but received faith on the hand of the apostle Paul; based on the lack of a historical support; and to that such an interpretation would otherwise be contradictory to the introduction of his gospel, in which he says about the things concerning the Lord Christ: “***Just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us”*** (1: 2); which clearly shows that the author did not see the Lord Christ, but elaborately recorded what he received through the tradition, and confirmed to him by those who were eyewitnesses. That is why, one of the scholars comments on this gospel by saying: [It is a work referred to the faith of the congregation; set upon tradition, and is not an individual work].

+ St. Luke has been a physician (Colossians 4: 14), and an artist, who, according to tradition painted the portrait of the Virgin St. Mary.

+ St. Luke was a close friend of the apostle St. Paul. According to the book of Acts, “*They sailed from Troas to Samothrace, then to Neapolis, and then to Philippi”* (Acts 16: 11, 12) – in the second preaching journey; Then, in the third preaching journey, the apostle Paul returned, and followed by St. Luke, from Philippi to Jerusalem (Acts 20: 5: 21); …….. We see him accompanying the apostle Paul as a captive in Rome (Acts 28: 30); and we see him with St. Paul in his last moments, as the later said in his farewell message: “*Only Luke is with me”* (2 Timothy 4: 11).

Through their close bond, the Evangelist St. Luke told us much of God’s preaching work through the apostle Paul in the book of Acts. Paul called him “*Luke, the beloved physician”* (Colossians 4: 14); as well as “*who works with me”.*

It was said that St. Luke lived a virgin; preached in Achaia – Greece; was martyred when he was 84 years old; and his relics were transformed to Constantinople in the year 357 AD by Emperor Constantinos the second; and in 1177 AD it was transformed to Padau.

Reference of the book to him:

a- According to the writings of the fathers: Justin the martyr, Erinaos, Origen, and Tertullian, the testimony of the Church in the early centuries clearly came that the author of the book was the preacher Luke, author of the book of Acts, and the companion of the Apostle Paul.

b- Beside those outer evidences, the book itself carries proofs that its author is our teacher St. Paul; including that the book was addressed to 'Theophilus",the same person to whom the book of Acts was addressed; and the introduction of the book of Acts came as a consummation of the gospel according to Luke. The author is the same; and the two books are similar in language, style, and thoughts; beside the fact that the elaborate expressions he used in describing the ailments healed by the Lord Christ, show that its author is a physician. As a physician who honors his profession, he did not say what St. Mark did concerning the woman with the flow of blood: "*She had suffered many things from many physicians; she had spent all what she had and was no better, but rather grew worse*" (Mark 5: 26); but only said: "***She had spent all her livelihood on physicians, and could not be healed by any"*** (8: 43).

The date of its writing:

There are no certain tradition concerning the date of its writing, nor where it was written. According to St. Erinaos, it was written prior to the martyrdom of the apostle Paul, as there is no mention in the book of that important event. While according to St. Jerome, based on the Historian Josabius, the Caesarian, it was written after St. Paul was martyred.

As this gospel was written before the book of Acts; which was written before the martyrdom of the apostle Paul; according to many scholars it was written between the years 63 and 67 AD; most probably in Rome; although, according to others it was written in chaia – Greece, or in Alexandria.

The goal of writing it:

If the Evangelist St. Matthew, being a Jew, wrote the gospel according to him to the Jews to proclaim to them that Jesus was the Messiah the King, whose coming was long anticipated by the fathers and the prophets, to have a portion in His eternal spiritual kingdom; And if St. Mark wrote to the Romans to proclaim to them that Jesus was the Minister who works, not by the spirit of the temporal authority, haughtiness, and violence, but by the spirit of giving, to save by the works of His love, and not by armies nor temporal hosts; the Evangelist St. Luke, on the other hand, being a cultured physician Gentile, intending to serve those of the Helenic culture, wrote to the Greeks about the Lord Christ, being "The Friend of all mankind", to whom He presented His divine salvation works to realize what the Geek philosophy and human wisdom could not do. That is why this gospel is called "The gospel of the divine friendship" or "The gospel of Christ the Savior", as well as "**The ecumenical gospel**", representing a call to the whole humanity to receive the call of its heavenly friend, to respond to His salvation work through love.
Such a goal, we shall clearly see throughout our interpretation of the features of this book.

St. Luke wrote this book to his friend Theophilus (1: 3), addressing him as "the most excellent Theophilus"; hence, he is thought by the majority to be one of the elites of Alexandria, of an Antioch origin, the same as St. Luke himself. He wrote to him as being a fellow Gentile; not to benefit from him alone, but, according to the scholar Origen, for the benefit of the Gentiles who receive the Christian faith, in general.

Some claim that Luke has been a slave owned by his Gentile master Theophilus; and having treated him as a physician and healed him, he rewarded him by giving him his freedom; and Luke addressed his gospel to him as a sign of gratitude. While, according to thers, the word "Theophilus", meaning (who loves God), is an alias name of an elite of Alexandria, whose name was concealed to spare him troubles because of his Christianity……...Anyway, this book is addressed to the Gentiles in general, to let hem enjoy their Heavenly Friend, as the Savior of their souls.

Its distinctive features:

1- Presenting the Lord Christ as "The Savior, Friend of humanity", the Evangelist often talked to us about "The Son of Man", who came to us to bear our humanity to grant us the fellowship of the divine nature. …….. Even though the Greek philosophy presented mere thoughts that could not occupy the heart, nor change the depths, "the Son of Man", came as a Friend of man, to receive in him to grant him, through this unique friendship exalted possibilities to work in his depths, and to reflect upon his behavior.

   Calling the Lord "the Son of Man" destroys our feeling of sojourn from God, or His sojourn from us; having come down to accompany us on our path.

2- The most important feature of this gospel is that it presents "*The Savior Friend"* to the whole humanity; it is an **ecumenical gospel**…… Calling all, and not just the Jews; we notice in it the following:

a- As the Jews consider themselves righteous, while all the other peoples are sinners, the Evangelist proclaims that the Lord Christ
Is "The Friend of the sinners". He was the only Evangelist to say: ***"The Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost"*** (19: 10). He, as well, presents to us a group of the Lord's sayings and parables that show the Lord's friendship and compassion on the sinners, like the parable concerning the longsuffering on the fruitless fig tree (13: 6-9); that of the lost sheep, the lost coin (Luke 15:8, 9); the prodigal son (15: 11 - 32); and he presented to us the episode of the sinner woman (7: 36); the repentance of Zacchaeus the tax-collector (19: 10); and the repentance of the robber on the cross (23: 40-43).; etc.

a- He quoted the sayings and the episodes that open hope before the Gentiles, like that of the prophet Isaiah: "*All flesh shall see the salvation of the Lord"* (Isaiah 52::10).; the message of the prophet Elijah to the Gentile widow of Sidon (4: 35); and the message of the prophet Elisha to the pagan Gentile Naaman the Syrian (4: 27)

b- He mentioned sending the 70 disciples. If the 12 apostles represent the call to the Jews (the 12 tribes), the bfigure 70 refers to the fullness of the Gentiles.

c- In the genealogy of the Lord Christ, he did not start with Abraham, but with Adam, father of all mankind (3: 38)

3- Being the book of the divine friendship toward man, this friendship is also directed to the children and women, sanctifying childhood, and exalting the women and their positive role. And He, as well, gave special care to the poor, the needy, the rejected, and the exiled.

Concerning the children, he was the only Evangelist to mention the birth of John the Baptist and his childhood; the enunciation of the birth of the infant Jesus in some detail; the exultation of the fetus in Elizabeth's womb, when the Virgin St. Mary entered her house and greeted her; the circumcision of the infant Jesus, His entrance into the temple together with His mother on the fortieth day after his birth; and His going to the temple when He was 12 years old, etc.

Concerning woman, according to some scholars, the Evangelist Luke, in his ecumenical gospel, he gave special care to women more than the other evangelists. In the Hellenic world, it so seems that, socially and legally, women occupied a better situation than by the Jews at that time; hence Luke intended to show that the evangelic message is not limited by the Jewish traditions.

St. Luke was the only evangelist to mention the woman who worshipped in the temple (2: 26); and recorded, as well, Martha's service, and the sitting of her sister Mary at the feet of the Savior to enjoy listening to His words.

He cared for the poor and the needy …….. How the enunciation we sent to the poor girl of Nazarene; how the angels cared for the simple shepherds; the words of the Lord about the rich man and the poor; about the banquet of the blind, the lame, and the maimed; the parable of the good Samaritan; of the tax-collector; the story of the harlot in the house of Simon the Pharisee; the parable of the prodigal son; the story of Mary Magdalene; and the acceptance of the repentant robber on the cross, etc. According to a scholar: St. Luke showed care to the minorities, the rejected peoples like the Samaritans, the lepers, the tax-collectors, the soldiers, the sinners in general who are in shame; the Gentile needy shepherds; all of whom find encouragement in his gospel.

4- According to some scholars like 'Leon Dufour', the gospel according to Luke, with some reservation, could be called "**The social gospel'**; on account of that he talked much about the commitment to give the poor (3: 10, etc.; 14: 12-14); proclaiming the chastisement against those who refrain from fulfilling their needs (16: 25 etc.); and made clear the commitment against oppression and false accusation (3: 10-14).

It is not right to call a gospel "social", and another "spiritual"; for the life of faith is one integral indivisible unit; In case the spiritual side is presented, it does not disregard the social side; and in case the social side is presented, it so done from a spiritual aspect. What the Evangelist Luke presented concerning care for the poor, the needy, the suffering, and the oppressed; are nothing but the natural fruition of our taste of the friendship of the Lord Christ toward us, being the Friend who cares for all, particularly those spiritually, materially, socially, or psychologically needy …… It is, therefore, befitting of us, as His friends, to pay His love back with love; and to bear His features in us; as what He gives us, we should give, in one way or another to our brethren.

5- Being our Friend, He presents to us, not only the salvation on the cross, but through this love, He enters into the different aspects of our daily life. We see Him has dinner in the house of Simon the Pharisee; accepts the invitation to the banquet of Zacchaeus; and responds to the hospitality of the two disciples of Emmaus.

As our Friend, not seek violence, nor bigotry; we see Him rebuke the disciple John, for seeking a command to have fire to come down from heaven and consume the Samaritans 99: 54); and rebuked the disciples by saying: "*he who is not against us is on our side"* (9: 50) ……. It is "The gospel of mercy", or "the great gospel of forgiveness"

As our Friend, He longs for us, and stirs us up, to receive His friendship, and to respond to His love; through presenting analogies like:

- The episode of Simon the Pharisee and the sinner woman; the former presented his hospitality, but not his heart; whereas the latter, despite her many sins, by love she knew how to enjoy friendship and forgiveness
- The parable of the Pharisee and the tax-collector: the former entered the temple with lawful works he cherishes; but in his pride he failed to gain the friendship of the Lord; while the latter (the tax-collector), while standing at the back row, could enter into the heart of the Great Friend through humility.
- The parable of the good Samaritan, the Levite, and the priest: The former enjoyed entrance into this friendship and responding to it through having his heart open to all humanity; while the two people of religion lost the friendship through the narrowness of their hearts.
- The parable of the prodigal younger brother and his older brother: the former got the blessing, and enjoyed the friendship through repentance and return; while his older brother lost his relationship with his father because of his pride.
- The episode of the repentant robber, and the non-repentant robber; the former took the kingdom by force, in his last moments
- The blessings and the woes.

6- If the Greek culture prevailed on the world at that time, it did not present to humanity a true and joyful people; but man lived seeking every day a new philosophy or thought he did not knew before …… Hens the Evangelist Luke wrote his gospel to proclaim that Christ, the Friend of humanity, is the Grantor of the inner joy; as his gospel included many hymns of praise, cherished and used by the Church in her worship and holy liturgies, like the angelic hymn of praise of the Epiphany (2: 14); that of Zecharias (1: 68-79); that of St. Mary; and that of Simon the elder (2: 29-32).

The coming of the Savior Friend created an atmosphere of joy …….. The book started by the talk by the angel's talk to Zecharias concerning the forerunner to that faithful Friend, saying: "*You will have joy and gladness; and many will rejoice at his birth"* (1: 14); and (1: 58). As to the birth of the Lord, it was accompanied with the opening of heaven on earth for preaching: "*Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people"* (2: 10). And when the 70 disciples returned from their preaching mission, he said: "*Then the seventy returned with joy saying: 'Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name'"* (!0: 17); And it was said: "*In that hour Jesus rejoiced in the Spirit, and said: 'I thank You Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and the prudent and revealed them to babes. Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Your sight'"* (10: 21).Preaching that unique Friend has exulted the heart of the Savior Himself for the sake of the simple; and was the subject of the gladness of heart to the Father ….He even proclaimed that "*I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents ……..."* (15: 7).

It is an inner joy that fills the heart of the repentant sinner, when he find in His divine Friend all satisfaction; it is said about Zacchaeus: "*He made haste and came down, and received him joyfully"* (19: 6); and joy for all the people, who rejoiced in all the glorious works He has done*.;* and when he entered Jerusalem, it was said: "*The whole multitude of the* disciples *began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works they have seen"* (19: 37).

The book ended by joy in the Friend resurrected from the dead and ascending to heaven; it is said that the disciples, when that amazing Friend appeared to them: "*While they still did not believe for joy and marveled ……"* (24: 41); and again directly after His ascension: "*They worshipped Him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy"* (24: 51).
The Lord Christ, therefore, came to realize the pleasure to the Father, and for Him to rejoice in the faithful humanity by His blood ; He filled His disciples and apostles with joy, and poured over His Church His gladness; so He did on the repentant sinners.

And in order to discern between this joy and that temporary joy of the world, he gave us the parable of the foolish rich man who said to himself: "*Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink, and be merry'; but God said to him: 'Fool, this night, your soul will be required of you; then, whose will these things be, which you have provided?"* (12: 20)
For all that, it was also called: "The gospel of the Messianic Joy".

7- Having come to us as our Friend, the Lord Christ gave Himself to us as a Role Model. In many situations He showed Himself "A Prayer'; as when He was baptized (3: 21); after nHe healed the leper; before He calls the twelve disciples (6: 12); when He transfigured (9: 280; on the cross for the sake of His crucifiers; and in the last moments of His life on earth ……. Appearing as a Prayer, means that He bore us in Him, to enjoy connecting to the Father…. .

In this gospel, the Lord talks to us about praying, more than He did in the rest of the gospels; in it He gave us the Lord's prayer; and stressed the importance of persisting on praying; giving the parable of the one who goes to his friend to seek three loaves of bread; and that of the unjust judge who does not fear God, who responded to the widow because she troubled him by her continual coming to him.

8- According to some, the goal of the gospels in general, and the gospel according to Luke in particular, is not merely to parade the life of the Lord Christ, nor His history, as much as to present the Church in which the Lord Christ lived and worked for her sake; These gospels speak about the Christ of the Church as it tastes Him, through living around Him, and holding fast to Him. St.is gospel, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, gives the life of the Church during the time the Lord lived in the flesh; while in the book of Acts, he gives her life while His presence on the right hand of the Father after His ascension; giving her His Holy Spirit…….. He is the Friend, unceasingly working: while He was in the flesh; and is still working after His ascension, until He encounters her on the clouds.

9- As there was a feeling among the early church that the second coming of the Lord Christ was so close that it would be realized in the apostolic era; this issue was dealt with by the apostle Paul in his second epistle to the Thessalonians, to confirm that the Lord will not come before the appearance of "the man of sin", and the movement of apostasy. Bearing the same view, St. Luke proclaims in his gospel, as well as in the book of Acts, that the death, resurrection, and glorious ascension, of the Lord, do not mean His second coming is at hand; nor directly after the desolation of Jerusalem. For some have misunderstood the words of the Evangelist St. Mark (14: 62; 9: 1), he proclaimed that the kingdom of the Messiah actually happens, first in the Church here, and is realized in the heart; and when a multitude of believers who are saved, join the Church every day ……. Namely, the second coming of the Lord will first be realized by dwelling in the hearts of the elect; and once He consummate His work here in this world, He will then come on the clouds.

10- According to some, the gospel according to Luke came conforming to the six first books of the Old Testament, in the following way:

- a- The new book of **Genesis** describes the birth of the Lord Christ and His childhood, by which the new creation is realized; For by the appearance of the second Adam, humanity set forth to a new world
- b- The new book of **Exodus**, is realized by the temptation of the Lord Christ in the wilderness for 40 days, where He conquered the devil to our account; conforming to the diaspora of the people of Israel 40 years after their exodus, and their continuous falling into the sin of grumbling.
- c- The new book of **Leviticus** is setting the twelve disciples, and giving the sermons of their ordination, as another book of Leviticus (6: 10, etc.)
- d- The new book of **Numbers** is realized through sending the 70 disciples to preach.
- e- Concerning the book of **Deuteronomy**, it represents the greater part of the gospel, which includes many of the teachings of the Lord, particularly in 9: 51 to 18: 14.
- f- The book of **Joshua** as presented by our teacher St. Luke is the episode of the passions of the Lord Christ and His resurrection. Receiving the harlot Rahab is analogous to that of Zechaeus the tax-collector (Luke 19: 1, 2).

11- The gospel according to Luke showed the role of the Holy Spirit: About John the Baptist, the angel proclaimed that he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's womb (1: 15); His role in the divine incarnation (1: 35); in the prophetic sayings (1: 67; 2: 25-27); in the baptism (3: 16); His appearance in the epiphany of the Lord Christ ((3: 22)……. By that he binds between the work of the Lord Christ and that of His Holy Spirit (4: 1, 14, 18; 10: 21; 11: 13; 10, 12)

12- This book is called "**The gospel of wholeness"**; including many episodes (and the parables) that did not come in the other gospels; supported by his close relation to St. Mary

It is the only gospel to include the following miracles: The catching of fish (5: 4-11); Raising the son of the widow of Nain from the dead (7: 11); healing the woman with the spirit of weakness (13: 11-17); healing the leper (14: 1-6); healing the ten lepers (17: 11 – 19); healing the ear of the servant of the high priest (22: 50-51).
It is also the only gospel to include the following parables: The two debtors (7: 41-43); the good Samaritan 9(14: 25-37); the persistent friend (11: 5-8); the foolish rich man ((12: 16-20); the fruitless fig tree (13: 6-9); the lost coin (15: 8-10); the prodigal son (15: 11-32); the dishonest steward (16: 1-13); the rich man and Lazarus (16: 19-31); The Pharisee and the tax-collector (18: 10-14).

It was, as well, the only gospel to include certain events, like the answer given by John the Baptist to the people; Christ weeping on Jerusalem; Christ's talk with Moses and Elijah when transfigured; the perspiration from His forehead like drops of blood; His address to the daughters of Jerusalem; His encounter with the disciples of Emmaus; beside some details concerning His ascension.

13- Concerning the style of writing, as we have previously said in more than one location, that when the Holy Spirit works in an author, and inspires him to write, He does not take away his personality, but uses his possibilities, inspires him, and keeps him from errors…… The possibilities of the Evangelist St. Luke appeared as a physician in the elaborate investigation of things; and as a physician and artist at the same time, in his delicate way of writing, bearing such sweet poetic touches, that his gospel became a source from which artists were inspired in creating their works.

As a friend of the apostle Paul in several of his journeys, there are certain similarities in their ways of writing; something that made the scholar Tertullian say that the Evangelist St. Luke has been enlightened by the apostle Paul

[See Luke 4- 22 with Colossians 4: 6; Luke 4: 32 with 1 Corinthians 2: 4; Luke 6: 36 with 2 Corinthians 1: 3; Luke 6: 39 with Romans 2: 19; Luke 6: 56 with 2 Corinthians 10: 18; Luke 10: 8 with 1 Corinthians 10: 23; Luke 11: 41 with Titus 1: 15; Luke 18: 1 with 2 Thessalonians 1: 11; Luke 21: 36 with Ephesians 6: 18; Luke 22: 19, 20 with 1 Corinthians 11 23-29; Luke 24: 34 with 1 Corinthians 15: 5]

The divisions of the book:

1-	Our Friend became like us	Chapters	1 - 3
2-	Our Friend is tempted just like us		4
3-	Our Friend feels our sufferings		5 - 18
4-	Our Faithful Friend		19 - 23
5-	Our Friend resurrected from the dead		24 -

==========

THE FIRST DIVISION

OUR FRIEND BECAME LIKE US

(Chapters 1 to 3)

- Giving the good news of incarnation Chapter 1
- The birth of the Heavenly Friend Chapter 2
- Proclamation of the Heavenly Friend Chapter 3

CHAPTER 1

GIVING THE GOOD NEWS OF THE INCARNATION

The first chapter of this book came as an introduction to it to reveal the goal of the whole book, which is to proclaim the Person of the Messiah, as the true Friend to humanity who grants it joy, and transforms its life into a joyful hymn of praise. In this chapter we find the preparation for the coming of this unique Friend, who grants the barren Elizabeth, in her old age, a child to take away her reproach among people; who opens the tongue of Zacharias the priest in praise at the birth of Jesus' forerunner; and who blesses the Nazarene little virgin girl, with an exalted heavenly good news. Even the embryo in Elizabeth's womb gets exultant and dances with joy. These all are introductory portraits which reveal the Person of the Lord Jesus Himself, and His work in our life as a heavenly Friend, who is able to take away the reproach of our bareness, to open our tongue, and to restore our gladness

.

1.	An introduction to the book	1-4
2.	The good news to Zacharias of John's birth	5-17
3.	Turning Zacharias temporarily mute	18-25
4.	The Enunciation of the Divine Incarnation	26-38
5.	Mary's Encounter with Elizabeth	39-45

6. The Virgin's hymn of Praise 46-56
7. John's Birth and Circumcision 57-66
8. Zacharias the priest's Prophecy 67-80

1- AN INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK:

Our teacher St. Luke opened his gospel with the following words:

***"Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed"*(1- 4).**

In this introduction which is written in beautiful Greek style, we may notice the following:

a-These introductory words, refer to that many "*have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled*",

concerning the Lord Jesus and His salvation works. Few scholars think that, by this he means the evangelists St. Mark and St. Matthew. But the majority believe that he refers to unfaithful people who attempted to write about the Person of the Lord Jesus in a wrongful way; whose works were not recognized by the early church as canonical books. …… The scholar Origen, discerning between the gospel of our teacher St. Luke, as well as the other gospels written through an inspiration of the Holy Spirit and given to the church, and the human attempts to write gospels, says [Saying: "*have taken in hand"* implies an inclusive accusation against them that they have attempted to write the gospels without the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Whereas the preachers Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, on the other hand, have not attempted to compose, but being filled with the Holy Spirit, they wrote the gospels. ……Four gospels are canonical, and from these we draw our faith in our Lord and our Savior].

According to Pope St. Athanasius the apostolic: [The blessed St. Luke, while rebuking what is of people's making, he hands to us what is narrated by the saints. ……..Every saint who receives the tradition participates, without any deviation, to establish the teachings of the mysteries. To these true teachers alone, the divine Word seeks from us to disciples. For theirs is "*a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance*" (1 Timothy 1: 15). These are not disciples who have heard from others, but are rather eyewitnesses and ministers to the Word, for they delivered what they heard from Him.

b-As St. Luke writes about "***a narrative of things which have been fulfilled among us***", St. Ambrose compares this book to a house

built on the rock, bound to the perfect faith, firm and unshaken; faith based on the spiritual understanding, perception, and discernment between what is true and what is vain, and not based on mere miracles.

With the same concept, the scholar Origen says: "St. Luke expresses his feeling by saying "***of things which have been fulfilled among us*"**. He has known the story in all assurance of faith and mind, and has not hesitated to believe it. That is the case of the believer who attained the peak of faith, who says to the Lord: "*O let me not wonder from thy commandments"* (Psalm 119). This is why the apostle says about the strong and mighty believers, that they are: "*rooted and grounded in faith"* (Ephesians 3: 17).

He who is deeply rooted and well founded in faith, would never be destroyed, or collapse, even if tempest rages, strong winds blow, and rain fall on him like flood, because he is strongly and sturdily constructed. It is befitting of us not to believe that the strength of our faith is based on the tangible vision, or the fruit of mental intelligence. Let us leave this to the unbelievers who believe through seen signs and wonders. For the experienced strong believer, walks and thinks by the Spirit, discerning the truth from vanity].

c-What the Evangelist Luke records for us, he received through "delivery", or what we call "tradition"; which is a deposit, lived in the life of

the Church by the Holy Spirit, received by the generations through oral or written delivery, and through worship and behavior…….. which is confirmed by the Evangelist by saying: "***just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us"*** (1: 2).

Commenting on this phrase, the scholar Origen, justifying two main points in the Church delivery: First: saying "**eyewitnesses",** does not imply mere physical vision; for many have seen the Lord Christ according to the flesh, and yet did not perceive His Person, nor enjoyed His salvation. Second: The spiritual vision or perception has to be melded with work; hence he added "***and ministers of the word****";* there is no separation between the spiritual meditative life and work ……. The scholar Origen says: [The apostles have seen God the Word, not by seeing the incarnate Savior Christ, but by seeing God the Word (here, he does not mean the separation of Christ into two Persons; but confirms our commitment to perceive the truth of the incarnate Savior. If seeing the Lord Christ in flesh means seeing God the Word, that would imply that Pilate who delivered Jesus to death has seen

the Word; so would be Judas who betrayed Him, and so would be all those who cried out: “Crucify Him, crucify Him!”(John 19: 15). Such a view is far away from the truth; for the non-believer cannot see the Word of God, a vision clarified by the Savior by saying: “*Who has seen Me has seen the Father”* (John 15:9)]. Commenting on the verse: “***Just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word”*** (2), the scholar Origen says: [We may deduce from these words that knowledge could be a goal in itself, but has to be crowned by work…….. Being satisfied with knowledge without applying is useless knowledge. And the way knowledge is bound to practical application, so knowledge is bound to the ministry of the word ……..The word “eyewitnesses” means the theoretical knowledge; whereas the word “ministers” refers to the applied knowledge].

These view of the scholar Origen are clearly shown in the writings of St. Cyril the Great, and St. Ambrose.

According to St. Cyril the Great: [St. Luke says that the apostles of Christ were eyewitnesses of the Lord; in which Luke is on the same

page with St. John, who wrote: “*The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten*

of the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1: 14). Christ had to appear in flesh, to be see and touched; for, according to His divine

nature, He could not be seen or touched. John also said: “*That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen*

with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the word of life; the life was manifested, and we

have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you” (1 John 1: 1, 2). Do you hear how life was manifested to us, how we have handled

with our hands and have seen by our eyes? Christ appeared to make us perceive that the Son became flesh, we have seen Him as Man,

whom we could not see as God].

With the same meaning St. Ambrose says: [The disciples have seen and heard the Lord ……..,They have seen the Lord, those who have witnessed the glory of the Word together with Moses and Elijah (Matthew 16: 3); Those have seen the Lord Jesus in His glory; whereas the others (the Jews), who have known Him according to the flesh, have not seen Him; for it was given to the spiritual insight, and not to the physical eyes to see Jesus. The Jews did not see Him, even though they have known Him in the flesh; while Abraham has seen Him, as is written: “*Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad”* (John 8: 56); even though he did not see him according to the flesh …….; while the Jews did not see Him “*because their foolish hearts were darkened”* (Romans 1: 21)…….. When we see the Lord, we see Emmanuel, and perceive that God is with us; while he who does not see God with him, would not know Him who was born by the Virgin].

St. Luke, therefore, writes through the delivery which was granted to those who have witnessed the Lord, not only according to the flesh, but in their depths, and perceived the secret of His dwelling, and working in them.

I may say that we, as well, if we wish to understand the Holy Book, we are committed to receive witnessing the Lord in us, and encountering Him on the front of the practical living faith; lest we would listen to the words of rebuke that the Lord said to Philip: “*Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip?”*(John 14: 9)

d-The Evangelist Luke, not only called the apostles “Witnesses” of the Word, but also “Ministers” of the Word (2)…….. If the apostolic work is set

upon witnessing the Lord by a spiritual insight, to perceive His divine secrets; yet, not separated from work …….. So will the knowledge melds

with the spiritual experience; faith with strife; and meditation with ministering. According to St. Ambrose: [The apostles have got this grace ……..

they eye-witnessed; understood as that they also strived to recognize the lord; and they ministered, understood as having got the fruition of their

strife].

e-He addressed his gospel to “the most excellent Theophilus”; a title, we said in the introduction is given to those who occupy prominent positions

in the Roman State; By it “Felix” was called ((acts 23: 26; 24: 13), so was “Festus” (Acts 25). The word “Theophilus”, though means (he who

loves God), about which St. Ambrose comments, saying: [If you love God, then this good news is written for you; and if so, receive it from the

Bible as a deposit, and keep it in the depths of your soul “*That good thing which was committed to you, keep by the Holy Spirit who dwells in us”*

(2 Timothy 1: 14). Keep on meditating in it, and perpetually take refuge in it……Your first duty, as far as this deposit is concerned, is to keep it

faithfully, against the termites of heresy, and the corruption of rust]. According to the scholar Origen, Lest some may think that this gospel is

written for a specific person by the name of 'Theophilus'; I may say that all of you who, lovers of God, who listen to me, are 'Theophilus', a very

good and strong person …….. There is no weak 'Theophilus'; the source of his strength is the word of God]

1- THE GOOD NEWS TO ZECHARIAS OF THE BIRTH OF JOHN:

The Lord Christ came a Savior of the world, to grant it an inner people, and a heavenly joy. That is why, as a preparation for His coming, the barren Elizabeth enjoyed the birth of John, whose name means (God shows compassion);and the tongue of the mute Zecharias was opened to say a hymn of praise.. If Elisabeth, being a woman refers to the flesh; by God's compassion and grace, the reproach of the body was taken away, and it enjoyed an amazing spiritual fruition. Whereas Zecharias, referring to the soul. It set forth inside by the spirit of praise and joy instead of the muteness set on helplessness.

Telling us the story of the good news coming to Zecharias of the birth of John, with the language of a submissive worshipper, St. Luke says:

"*There was in the days of Herod the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zecharias, of the division of Abijah; his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth; and they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well advanced in years"* (5 – 7)

In his way of telling the story, it is noticed:

a-Being a man of science, as a physician, he elaborately fixed the date of the event, to be in the days of Herod the father, king of Judea, the second son of Antipas, the Edomite; who married 10 women, two of whom he killed; had a multitude of children, one of whom he killed ……. He who murdered the children of Bethlehem; and on his death bed he sought to kill the elites of Jerusalem, to let no one rejoice on his death; but he died before realizing his wish.

Any way, and in the midst of such a dark and corrupted atmosphere, politically and religiously; and when prophecy ceased for more than three centuries, there appeared two righteous persons before God: Zecharias, meaning (God remembers), and Elizabeth, the Greek version of the Hebrew word meaning (God vows) or (God's right hand). The two gave birth to John, meaning 9God is compassionate) or (God gives grace) …….. It is as though, in the midst of the corruption of this world, as we remember God, and be melded to His vows and true promises, we enjoy His compassion and His divine grace, working in us.

Commenting on the expression: "***They were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless****",* St. Ambrose says:[The phrase *"**were both righteous before God**"* has its significance. For those righteous before men are not necessarily righteous before God. Man's *look is different from God's; for man looks at the eyes, while God looks at the heart* (Samuel 16: 7). Somebody may seem to me worthy to be called righteous; but for the Lord, he is not; for his righteousness is not from a simple heart. Man cannot discern the hidden things; and the full reward is to be counted as righteous before God; as according to the apostle: "*whose praise is not from men but from God"* (Romans 2: 29). Truly blessed is he who is justified before God; truly blessed is he who is qualified to hear the Lord say about him: "*Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no deceit"* (John 1: 47). The true Israelite is he who sees God, and perceive that he is seen by God, and the hidden things in his heart are revealed before Him.

To clarify the meaning of the expression "***righteous before God****",* the scholar Origen says: [When nothing in me is found worthy of blame before men; I will be counted as righteous; …… yet the verdict of men is wrong; for they do not know how I erred in secret inside my heart; and how I looked at a woman with evil desire, and lived in the harlotry of heart. Men may see me giving alms according to my ability, yet they do not know whether I do it for the sake of God's commandment, or seeking the commendation of men …….. Blessed is man who is righteous before God, whose commendation is from God; for man cannot judge justly and clearly. Men could glorify him who is not worthy to be glorified; and condemn him who is not worthy to be condemned…….. God alone is just in commendation and condemnation].

And commenting on the word '**blameless',** he says: [Our Lord Jesus Christ referred to the Church that she is "*glorious, not having spot or wrinkles"* (Ephesians 5: 27). That does not mean that the son of the Church has not ever sinned, but lives the life of repentance. The expression: "*not having wrinkles",* refers to a hatred of the old man, and ceasing to sin. Hence he completes it by saying: "*that she should be wholly and without **blemish**";* The soul inherited the sin, but she becomes pure and blameless if the filth of sin is taken away].

The gospel proclaims their righteousness before God, and that they are blameless by their practical behavior: ***"walking in all the commandments and ordinances of God****";* The hidden righteousness is connected to the obedience of the commandments, and abiding to His ordinances. That is the way of our righteousness by the Holy Spirit, who grants us, in the worthiness of the blood, to enter to the commandment, and to live it by obedience in joy, and to understand the ordinances of God, to bear the spirit of discernment in us.

Dealing with the issue "The righteousness in Christ", St. Augustine spoke to us about the righteousness of Zecharias and Elizabeth, proclaiming that men of the old covenant were also counted righteous in Christ, through their hope in the anticipated Messiah, who will give His life up as a price for our righteousness. In his talk about "Nature and Grace", he quotes the words of St. Ambrose, saying: [Men of the old covenant undoubtedly lived with such faith in Christ, even before His death (on the cross). Christ alone sends His Holy Spirit given to us; through whom love is poured in our hearts, by which alone, the righteous are so called]. In another location, St. Augustine confirms that the righteous of Zecharias is based upon the sacrificial work of the Lord Christ through his priestly practice, offering animal sacrifices, as a symbol of the sacrifice of Christ, saying: [Zecharias undoubtedly used to offer sacrifices on his own sins].

If Zecharias was counted as righteous, yet that does not mean that he did no sin; for as St. Augustine often confirmed the saying of St. Ambrose: No one in the world is without sin'].

b-"***Zecharias was of the division of Abijah"*** (5). The word 'Abijah' means (Jehovah is my Father); This division was of the descendants of Eleazar the priest, the eighth of 24 divisions into which the priests were divided since the time of David; each division works a weak every other six months, according to the lot. Another lot is done to choose who among the division who will burn the incense, which the Jews used to do every morning and evening.

According to St. Ambrose, Zecharias on whom the lot fell to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord" *(9),* refers to the Lord Christ, being the High Priest, who alone can enter into the heavenly sanctuaries to serve to our account, and to intercede for us by His blood. The lot falling on Zecharias refers to that his mission was not from men but from the Lord.

c-"***An angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing on the right side of the altar of incense"*** (11),
Commenting on this, the Scholar Origen says:[Having a dense body, man cannot behold the divine and spiritual beings, nor feel their presence, unless they appear to him …….. The appearance of God and His angels depends upon the will of God and His intention for us to see. God is present with us, so do His angels, and yet we do not see them……..

Of his words: [The Lord appeared to Abraham and to other prophets according to the divine grace. The inner eyes of Abraham are not the cause of seeing the Lord; but the grace of God that so granted him].

[An angel may be beside us now while we talk, but we cannot see him because of our unworthiness. The physical or the spiritual eye may exert an effort to reach such a vision; but unless the angel himself chooses to appear, those longing to see him will not be able to do].
[This fact does not only concern seeing God in the present time, but also when we depart from this world. God band His angels do not appear to all men directly after their departure …… but this gift is only given to those with a pure heart that qualify to see God; whereas he with a heart laden with mire, who could be together with the one with a pure heart in the same place; cannot see God, whom the one with the pure heart can see].

[I believe that this happened concerning the Lord Christ when He was in flesh on earth. Not everyone who beheld Him could see Him…… Pilate and Herod beheld Him but could not see Him as He truly is because of their unworthiness].

According to St. Ambrose: [We may see the Lord when He so wishes, yet we cannot see Him in His nature as He truly is ……He appeared to Abraham because He so intended. St. Steven saw heavens open and the Son of Man standing on the right hand of God; while the people were stoning him (acts 7: 9); who could not see God as he did. The prophet Isaiah also saw the Lord of hosts (Isaiah 6: 1); but no one else could]

[In this world, God would not be seen unless He intends to reveal Himself. But in the resurrection, only the pure in heart will see Him; for He Himself said: "*Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God"* (Matthew 5: 8). God blessed many, but promised only the pure in heart to see Him]

[We only see God in the pure heart; Do not search for God by the physical eye,…….. But "*Who may be able to comprehend with all the saints, what is the width, length, depth, and height, to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge"* (Ephesians 3: 18-19). By His compassion and nercy on us. God brings us forth to the fullness of stature of Christ, to be able to see Him].

In my work about “St. John Chrysostom”, I previously talked about “The vision of God”; but I should like to confirm here that God, being unseen, longs to proclaim Himself and to be seen by us, as a free gift He grants those with a pure heart. He unceasingly works in us by His Holy Spirit, to purify our hearts in Him, to be raised up to see Him, and to enjoy His fatherly bosoms, and the fellowship of the heavenly glories.

d-The angel of the Lord appeared standing on the right side of the altar of incense; namely between the golden altar (the prayer) and the table of the showbread (the sacrament of the Eucharist) ……. Whoever wishes to encounter the heavenly hosts needs to raise his hands in prayer, to offer a sacrifice of love, and incense of sweet fragrance before God; and to enter to the banquet of the Lord, to encounter the Lord of the heavenlies and to bear Him inside himself.

Concerning prayer, according to St. Oghris: [You should know that the saintly angels exhort us to pray, and stand joyfully by our side when we do, praying for our sake. But in case we slothfully receive strange views, we intensely offend them; on account of that, while they mightily fight on our behalf, we, on our side, do not even intend to supplicate to God for our own sake; but reject their services, and distance ourselves from the Lord their God, to go to the unclean demons].

As to approaching the holy banquet; according to St. John Chrysostom: [It is as though man is taken up to heaven itself, to stand by the throne of Glory, fly with the Seraphim, and sings the holy hymn].

e-“***And when Zecharias saw him he was troubled and fear fell upon him. But the angel said to him: ‘Do not be afraid Zecharias’”*** (12, 13).

If the vision of the heavenly creatures brings trouble on the heart of man, as something strange to him; but he will not stay long in his trouble, but heaven itself will care for him and calls him by his name, and will fill him with inner peace, together with exalted divine gifts.

Presenting to us a discernment between the heavenly visions and the deceptive one, St. Anthony the Great says that the former, even if it causes at first fear and trouble, on account of that man is not used to them, yet they bring forth true peace into the soul; while the latter will make the soul lose her peace. The former will kindle the heart with the heavenlies, while the latter will preoccupy the mind and confuse it with the temporal worries. St. Anthony says: [The appearance of these spirits (the angels) is tranquil and peaceful, and creates in the soul joy and courage; for God is our joy.

The thoughts created by these appearances make the soul unshakable, and enlighten it by this joy, to be able to discern the kind of spirits that appear to her; for the divine longing, and that of the goods to come, enter into the soul and unite with her. Contrary to the fear which accompanies the appearance of the evil spirits, these good spirits, on the other hand, cast fear away, by the love they show; the way the Gabriel did with Zecharias (Luke 1: 3); the angel who appeared to the women at the tomb of the Lord ((Matthew 28: 5); and the angel who appeared to the shepherds, who said to them: ”***Do not be afraid”*** (Luke 2: 10). And St. Anthony the Great said: [In case we see spirits that bring forth disturbance and worldly images, and threats of death, be sure that it is an attack by evil spirits].

f-Zecharias, with time, might have forgotten his request from God, or have lost hope for having a child; but his name Zecharias means (God remembers); which He did and granted him and his wife, not what would bring forth joy only into their hearts, but what bring gladness to many. {God, despite our own forgetfulness gives more than what we ask and beyond what we request; To Zechariah He confirmed His gift by addressing him by his name.

As to ‘John’, God’s gift to Zecharias and Elizabeth, the angel proclaimed the following:

*1-“**You will have joy and gladness; and many will rejoice in his birth”*** (14)

We already said that the gospel according to Luke is “**the gospel of joy”**; for God sent the forerunner John to proclaim repentance, as a preparation for he way of the Lord in the hearts of many, to bring joy to the heavenlies, as it did to believers …….God’s goal is to bring us back to His eternal joy, and to make us be in a heavenly peace, away from any bitterness or anguish; and behold, He even prepares for that joy by the birth of His forerunner.

In our interpretation of the book of Leviticus Chapter 12), we saw, according to the law, how the woman remains as though unclean a period after giving birth; as sin attached to us even in our birth and death. But now, as the Son of Righteousness started to shine on humanity, and to reconcile it with the heavenlies, our life turned into joy, and bith became joyful. According to St. Ambrose: [There is specific joy with the beginning of conception of the saints, and with their birth. For the saint not only brings joy to his own family, but will be the cause of salvation for many; a fact that teaches us to exult in the birth of the saints].

I also say that if we have lived so long with a barren soul and with a body with no spiritual fruition, let us receive . the heavenly promises of God, bear the compassion and grace of God, namely "John" in us, to exult and rejoice by God, and together with many, and even with heaven itself (Luke 15: 7).

Let our life be fruitful in the Lord, to bring joy to many; and not barren or with deadly fruit……. According to father Tadros: [Life and death are not good or evil in themselves; as proved by the birth of John the Baptist and of Judas. About the former is written: "***Many will rejoice in his birth****"* (14); while about the latter it is written: "*It would have been good for that man, if he had not been born"* (Matthew 26: 24)].

2-"For he will be great in the sight of the Lord" (15).

Even though John was not yet born, nor been conceived in his mother's womb, the angel calls him ***"great in the sight of the Lord".*** Greatness, therefore, is not by the count of days and years, nor by the strength of the body and the apparent works; but by the inner and fruitful life.

The world at that time generally used to despise children, and did not give them any human rights; ……. But the gospel of the Lord Christ reveals His friendship with the children, and looked at them as great in His sight; as was later confirmed by the Lord to His disciples, when He introduced to them a child to become like him for the sake of reaching the heavenly greatness (Matthew 18: 2, 3; Luke 18: 15).

Let us therefore, be children in evil, to be counted great and mature in the Lord. But let us not walk by the weakness and immaturity of childhood; lest we would be counted "*in bondage under the elements of the world"* (Galatians 4: 3); and according to St. Ambrose: [Only the spiritually mature will be able to overpass the corners of this world]. ……. Let us be spiritually mature in the Lord, and not despise the little children, according to the words of the Lord: "*Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones"* (Matthew 18: 10).

In his interpretation of the gospel according to Luke, concerning the greatness of John, St. Ambrose says: [Our life is not evaluated by time, but by the level of virtues ……. John was called great, not because of the strength of his body, but of his spirit. He did not conquer empires, nor put in his program to have spoils and conquests, but looked forward to what is far more better; for he came to be the voice crying out in the wilderness; who overcame the evil desires and the slothfulness of the body, by the exaltation and strength of his spirit. In the worldly things he was small, but great in the spirituals. Finally, the secret of his greatness was that love for this temporal life did not prevail on him, to hinder him condemning sin]

3-"He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb" (15)

Having given him the name of the newborn, and proclaimed his activity as the one who brings joy to hearts, the angel told about his possibilities. On the negative aspect, "***shall drink neither wine nor strong drink"***; as a Nazirite from God, there will be no place in his body or in his heart for the pleasures of this world; while, on the positive aspect, he will not live deprived, but will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's womb …..he will be denied of the material wine, but he will be, instead, watered with the joy-giving heavenly wine.

According to the scholar Origen: [The archangel came to proclaim the birth of John who will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's womb …….; in his mother's womb John exulted for joy, and could not cease, when the mother of Jesus came; as though he was attempting to come out to greet her ……"***As soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy"*** (44)].

And according to St. Ambrose: [Beside the spirit of life as a fetus, he has got the spirit of grace. As the true life is preceded by grace to sanctify it; the Lord says to the prophet Jeremiah: "*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you were born I sanctified you. I ordained you a prophet to the nations"* (Jeremieh 1: 5). There is great difference between the spirit of the world and the spirit of grace: the former starts by birth and ends by death; whereas the latter is not limited by time nor by years, death would never be able to quench its flame; and the womb of motherhood would not enclose it ……Whoever gets the spirit of grace, will no more lack anything; and whoever gets the Holy Spirit will reach the summit of virtues.

4-"And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God" (16).

Here the angel confirms John's mission, which is to turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, by preparing the way through repentance to receive the Lord Christ, Savior of the world. According to the scholar Origen says that the world is in perpetual need of John's work, which he calls (John's secret), to bring every soul to abide in Christ; saying: [On my side, I believe that John's secret is still realized up to this day; man can come to believe in Christ Jesus, if he has the spirit of John, his power in him, has his toughness, and walks along the narrow road, to prepare an entire nation for our Lord …….. Up to this very day, the spirit of John and his power go before the coming of the Lord Jesus].

5-"He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah" (17)

Commenting on this phrase, the scholar Origen says: [He did not say 'the soul' of Elijah, but said "***the spirit and power of Elijah***". Like all other prophets, Elijah had spirit and power……. The spirit that dwelt in Elijah dwelt in John; and the power that was in Elijah is in John].

In a nice comparison between Elijah and John the Baptist, St. Ambrose says: [Elijah lived in the wilderness, so did John; the ravens sustained Elijah, while the other in the wilderness trampled over all the pleasures of the world, loved poverty and hated luxury ……Elijah did not care for the favor of king Ahab; while John despised that of king Herod…….Elijah's mantle divided the waters of the River Jordan; while John made these waters a basin that grants salvation. …….Elijah appeared with the Lord in glory (in the transfiguration), and John lived with the Lord on earth ……...Elijah precedes the first coming of the Lord; while John preceded His second coming; ……Elijah brought rain down on earth after three years of draught; and John washed the dust off our bodies in the waters of faith through three years (the year of the era of the early fathers; that of the era of Moses; then that of the coming of the Lord our God and Savior].

The secret of the power in St. John was that he bore the spirit of Elijah, not meaning his spirit as a person, but the spirit of power granted to him by God; namely the possibilities given to him; hence St. Augustine says: [By the spirit of Elijah he means the Holy Spirit received by Elijah].

3-TURNING ZECHARIAS TEMPORARILY MUTE:

"*And Zecharias said to the angel: 'How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years?' And the angel answered and said to him: 'I am Gabriel who stands in the presence of God, and was sent to speak to you, and to bring you these glad tidings. But behold, you will be mute not able to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their own time'*" (18 – 20)

In this conversation between the archangel Gabriel and Zecharias the priest inside the temple, we may notice the following:

(1) Zecharias did not believe the words of the angel, despite the fact that he recognized the angel and his voice, during daytime, inside the temple; something to blame him on; in particular that the holy history mentions living examples of elders who gave birth while their women were barren, like Sarah, wife of Abraham. Being a righteous man, Zecharias did not put the blame on his wife for not giving birth; and did not mention in his talk to the angel, that she was barren; but began by himself, saying: "*I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years"*……. How beautiful is the righteous gentle soul that never hurt the feelings of others, even in their absence! Zechariah did not complain even to heaven the barrenness of his wife!

(2) The archangel proclaimed his identity, that he is 'Gabriel', meaning (Might of God); and that the secret of his power or might is that "*He stands in the presence of God"* ……He came bearing the divine promise; came to bring the good tidings; but he was also committed to chastise by turning him mute as a command from God.

(3) In his love, he gave Zechariah the priest the good tidings of John's birth, as a free gift to him, and even to all mankind; Now, having enjoyed that sure promise, and the Lord, on His angel's mouth, provided him with the child's name, features, mission, and possibilities; and yet he did not believe, God, in His love, as well, allowed for him to be chastised for a certain time …….. In His fatherhood for us, God grants; and also chastises for our edification.

It is amazing that even the faults we commit, God uses for good. What happened with Zechariah because of his doubt, came to be a symbol of what will happen to the Jewish people who did not believe the heaven, nor the promises of God; who, because they did not receive our Lord Jesus a spiritual King and Savior, have fallen under chastisement, to become mute until they receive faith at the end of time. Having rejected the Word of the incarnate God, they were denied the prophets; and the temple worship ceased……..

According to the scholar Origen: [Becoming mute, Zecharias refers to that the people of Israel were denied the prophets; God talks no more to the Jews; while God the Word who is from the beginning came to us, Christ who is never mute came to be with us; ; yet He remains mute up to this very day concerning the Jews].

And according to St. Ambrose: [Being mute implies no more offering of sacrifices; no more prophets coming; the voice of the prophet and the priest ceased; "*For behold, The Lord, the Lord of hosts, takes away from Jerusalem and from Judah …….. the mighty man and the man of war, the judge and the prophet"* (Isaiah 3: 1). For us though, the Word of God came to us, He who will never be mute in us; hence the Jew cannot debate with the Christian: "*Since you seek a proof of Christ speaking in me*" (2 Corinthians 13: 3).

Having been mute, Zecharias talked with signs and body language. This, as well was a symbol of the Jews who cared for the physical works of the law without any spiritual understanding. And as said by the scholar Origen: [I believe that there are works and words with no meaning, as there are signs with no meaning ……..If we consider the Jewish statutes as though difficult to understand or interpret……. ; we can understand what happened to Zecharias as a portrait of what happen with the Jews up to this very day. Purification for them was like movements without meaning; and could be likened to mute signs; So is the Passover and the other feasts are no more than simple movements and not facts. Up to this very day, the Israeli people are deaf and mute; for having rejected the Word].

By turning mute, Zecharias the priest proclaimed the need for the divine "Word" lost by Israel …….It is as though even by turning mute, he paved the way to proclaim the Lord Christ. On another aspect he was allowed to become mute, as a magnificent chance to cease talking with people, to preoccupy his heart with talking with God, to meditate in His works, to get in touch with His secrets, and to understand the prophecies.

The way Zecharias the priest kept away from people because of his inability to talk, so did his wife Elizabeth because of feeling ashamed; the Evangelist says: "*And after those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and she hid herself five months, saying: 'Thus the Lord has dealt with me, ……..''* (24 – 26). That for her, as well as it is for her husband, was a spiritual chance to talk to God alone; to meditate in His dealing with them, and to wait for His gift to them.

Both the scholar Origen and St. Ambrose believed that feeling shame was on account of that Elizabeth, having not given birth, ceased to have any physical relationship with her man; for the men of God had such relationship for the sake of having children; and once they realize that they will not, their relationship with their wives stay within the circle of marital love, without physical contacts……Once Elizabeth conceived, she felt ashamed to appear pregnant before people; until the time came to encounter the Virgin Mary, bearing the incarnate Word of God in her womb; And when the fetus exulted in her womb, she ceased to feel shame …….. for her knowledge that she is bearing an exalted fruit; bearing him who, "*among those born of women there has not risen one greater John the Baptist"* (Matthew 11: 11)..

We may say that the physical relationships between spouses are holy and pure, as long as they are within reason, and not prevailed by evil desire and selfishness through seeking the pleasure of the body; but by the spirit of marital love and giving…….. In Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of God, the couple find themselves become one body, live by the spirit even during the moments they encounter one another; unceasingly shadowed by the Spirit of God; to be perpetually sanctified in all their behaviors.

4-THE ENUNCIATION OF THE DIVINE INCARNATION:

"*Now in the sixth month 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"* (26, 27)

(1)Five months before, the angel came to give Zecharias the priest the good news of John's birth. Now, with the beginning of the sixth

month, he came again to give the virgin St. Mary the good news of Jesus birth. But the two enunciations were greatly different. The former enunciation took place in the temple, during the collective worship, and talked about by the priests as it happened with their fellow priest; yet it was an enunciation of the birth of the greatest among those born by wome, John the forerunner, minister of the Word. Whereas the second enunciation took place in an unknown house, in a poor village, and in a secret way even to the head of the household – the carpenter Joseph – It was the enunciation of the incarnation of the Word Himself. The Son has emptied Himself even in the enunciation of His birth, that did not take place among the priests, nor in the temple, or on the level of the congregation; but took place with a poor girl in a poor house.

(2)"***To a virgin betrothed to a man ……"*** (27). Why was the angel sent to an un-betrothed girl?

a-According to the scholar Origen, the presence of a man to whom Mary is betrothed, would take away any doubt concerning her when the symptoms of pregnancy begin to show on her. And according to St. Ambrose: [Probably not to be accused of harlotry. The Holy Book described her by two things at the same time: a wife, and a virgin: a virgin because she did not know a man; and a wife, to protect her against anything that spoil her reputation; as the swelling of her belly would refer to a loss of virginity (in the people's sight). God chose to have some doubt His true genealogy, rather than to have them doubt the purity of His mother …….. He chose not to reveal His person at the expense of His mother]

We have already studied the betrothal and marriage according to the Jewish tradition; and how the betrothal was counted as equal to marriage, as known nowadays, in every aspect, except for the physical relationships ……. – hence St. Mary was called "Joseph's wife".

b-According to the scholar Origen, quoting St. Agnatius, the presence of Joseph would raise doubt in the mind of the devil concerning the newborn, and would confuse him concerning the divine incarnation. Having the same view, St. Ambrose said: [Another reason which could not be disregarded, is that the prince of this world, did not discover the perpetual virginity of the virgin; having seen her with a man, he did not doubt her newborn. God allowed for taking away that knowledge from the prince of this world. This was apparent when the Lord commanded His disciples not to tell anyone that He is Christ (Matthew 16: 22); as He did with those He healed (Matthew 5: 4); and commanded the demons not to speak about the Son of God (Luke 4: 350; and as also confirmed by the apostle, saying: "*But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory, which none of the rulers of this age knew; for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory"* (1 Corinthians 2: 7, 8). Namely, the Lord concealed His identity from the rulers of men; and from the devil for the sake of our salvation, to conquer him; as He concealed it during the temptation; and when he cried out and addressed Him as "the Son of God", He refrained from confirming His Divinity to him. And even though , in his confusion, the devil said to Jesus: "*If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down"* (Matthew 4: 6), yet he eventually recognized Him; and the demons cried out, saying: "*What have we to do with You, Jesus, You Son of God? Have You come here to torment us before the time?"* (Matthew 8: 29)……. The demons recognized Him because they anticipated His coming; yet the rulers of this world did not …….. The devil, craftily could reveal the written things; while those who were caught by the honors of this world could not recognize the works of God.

(3)By repeating the word "virgin", the Evangelist intends to confirm her virginity, to proclaim that the Lord Christ is not the seed of man; a fact proclaimed by the prophet Ezekiel concerning the gate facing the east: *This gate shall be shut; it shall not be opened, and no man shall enter by it, because the Lord God of Israel has entered by it"* (Ezekiel 44: 2, 3). That is why, in the Byzantine rite, concerning the virgin, it came as: {Peace be to you, O unique gate, through whom alone the Word passed]

She is a virgin and a wife (a bride) at the same time; being the bride of Christ, she represents the foremost member in the Church; as according to St. Ambrose: [Mary, the virgin wife represented at the same time the blameless bride Church; for, like the virgin Church the bride of Christ, conceived with us by the Holy Spirit, and delivered us without pain; Mary conceived by the Spirit, not by marriage; to come to represent all churches that give fruition by the Spirit and by grace; even though apparently united under the banner of s human shepherd].

According to St. Augustine: [As Mary give birth to Him who is your Head; so did the Church, who is, as well, a mother and a virgin; a mother in the heart of our Love; and a virgin in her unshaken faith; she, like the virgin Mary, mother of many, and at the same time the mother of the One, the church is the mother of a multitude of nations that represent one body].

And according to St. Cyril the Great: [Let us glorify Mary the perpetual virgin who, herself is the holy Church, by the hymns of joy]

(4)The Evangelist proclaims the name of the town to which the angel came to encounter the virgin St. Mary, as "Nazareth", a town in Galilee 88 miles north of Jerusalem; and 15 miles south-east of xxxxxx, where St. Joseph and St. Mary lived, and where the Lord Christ spent the greater portion of the first thirty years of His life (Luke 3: 23; Mark 1: 9); hence called "Jesus of Nazareth" (Matthew 12: 11; Mark 1: 24). Starting His mission, its people rejected Him twice (Luke 4: 28-31; Matthew 4: 13; 13: 54-58; Mark 6: 1-6). ……Located on a hill (4: 29), Nazareth had no importance whatsoever, not to be mentioned by the Old Testament, nor by any document of the greater nations before the coming of Christ, or by the Jewish Historian Josephus.

The word "Nazareth" probably means "a rod" or "a branch"; hence the Lord Christ was often called "The Branch".

(5)The angel greeted her by saying:

"***Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed is you among women"*** (28)

It was not a regular greeting, but came uniquely to bear the whole meaning of joy; for the Greek word (Sheri), which was translated here as (peace), came about 80 times in the Septuagint version of the New Testament; used to express the joy of the people of God in some work that touches their salvation. ……. St. Mary, therefore, has got, in the name of the whole Church, in which she is a member, an exalted joy through the incarnation of God the Word, and dwelling in her.

The following are some comments by fathers on that unique greeting:

+ She was the only one called "highly favored one" (full of grace), on account of having got the grace, not acquired by anyone else;
having been filled with the talents of grace.

(St. Ambrose)

+ That birth was absolutely “a grace”; for in it the unity took place, of man with God; the body with the Word …… The worthiness to
realize it was not through the good works.

(St. Augustine)

+ She was clothed with the divine grace as a garment;
Her soul was filled with the divine wisdom;
In her heart, she enjoyed matrimony with God;
And was delivered God in her womb.

(Father Theodosius, bishop of Ankara)

Hearing the angel say to her: “***The Lord is with you”;*** this expression had a specific meaning for St. Mary; who tasted it on a unique level; having carried the Word of God in her womb; and nourished the divine fetus by her body and blood.

And him say: “***Blessed is you among women****”*; according to the scholar Origen: [The joy which the angel Gabriel brought to St. Mary, have taken away the verdict of sorrow issued by God against Eve…….The way sin came by a woman, and passed to man, so was the enunciations of good news by women (Mary and Elizabeth).

(6)“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 favor with God” (29, 30).

According to St. Jerome: [She was troubled and could not answer him, for she was not used to greet a man before; but once she recognized who he was, she did answer him; She, who was afraid to talk to a man, behold, she now talks to an angel without fear].

According to many fathers, the virgin Mary has been, as a living model of the virgins who dedicated their life to worship, hose who were characterized with strong shyness when encountering a man; and spend their life in their own home, or in the houses of virgins, not dealing with men. Yet, we cannot deny, that despite of being characterized with such strong shyness, and a complete dedication to the account of the Lord; and not intending to get married, as shown by saying to the angel: “***How can this be, since I do not know a man?”*** (34); yet she was an active person in the holy congregation; active in her prayers and godliness; active in her acceptance of the exalted gift from God (the incarnation of the Word in her womb); and active in her ministry; for in the first miracle performed by the Lord Christ, she said to Him: “*They have no wine”* (John 2: 3); she was with her Son even to the cross; and after the ascension she was always with the disciples to support them…….. Virginity does not mean negativity, but the positivity of the giving love, proclaimed through worship and work, within the limits of man’s talents he gets from the Lord Himself. Hence St. Augustine says: [We do not honor virginity for itself, but for belonging to God]/

(7)The divine promise to St. Mary on the tongue of the angel was:

“***He will be great, and He 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”*** (32, 33).

St. Mary enjoyed that divine conception; as the Son of the Highest was incarnate in her; He who was long anticipated by men of the Old covenant, as a King to sit forever on the throne of His father David; and as a Savior; hence called “Jesus” meaning (Jehovah is my salvation).

+ No one is like you, O St. Mart; fow while you dwell on earth, you became the mother of the Creator.

(Paralex – the hymn of blessing)

+ If the Son of God has become the Son of David; you should not doubt, O man, that you may become the son of God.
If God so descended to our depths, He did not do that in vain, but to lift us up high.
He was born in flesh, for you to be born again according to the spirit.
He was born by a woman, for you to be a son of God.

(St.John Chrysostom)

(8)Hearing the divine promise with the spirit of humility and faith, St Mary was confused; for such unique promise was never mentioned in the holy books to be given to another man;

“***Then Mary said to the angel: ‘How can this be, since I do not know a man? And the angel answered and said to her: ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you; and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore also that Holy One who is to born will be called the Son of God”*** (34, 35).

a-It so seems from the words uttered by St. Mary that she vowed virginity; for, if she wished to be married, she would not say 'HOW', but 'WHEN' will this be?'…… anticipating the fulfillment of the promise through marriage. But, having put in her heart to be a virgin for the Lord, the Virgin Lord dwelt in her to sanctify in her the spiritual virginity of the Church. According to St. Augustine: [Today the virgin Church celebrates the virgin birth …….

The Lord Christ confirmed the virginity of the heart He wishes the Church would have, first through the virginity of the body of Mary. Only the Church can still be a virgin even when bound to her Groom, the virgin's Son; giving herself completely to Him].

b-According to St. Ambrose: [Mary did not reject the words of the angel, nor hesitated to accept them, but she showed readiness for them. As to the phrase: "***How can this be?",*** it does not imply doubting the issue, but wondering how can it be realized …… It was her right to know how such a miraculous birth can happen[. That is why the answer by the angel came to reveal the secret of the work of God in her to realize it:

"***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"*** (35)

The Holy Spirit will come upon her to sanctify her, spirit and body; to prepare her for the work of the Father who sends His Son to her womb to incarnate from her. What an exalted divine secret, in which God proclaims His amazing love and honor for man!

Before such a proclamation, Mary bowed her head in obedience, to say: "***Behold, the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word"*** (38)…….. While Zecharias the priest expressed doubt in the possibility for his wife to give birth, the virgin believed, and in her obedience she received the work of God. According to St. Ambrose: [By her faith, Mary exalted above the priest. The priest erred, and the virgin corrected the error].. Because of his doubt, Zecharias became mute; while the virgin conceived with the incarnate Word, or the divine utterance that will never become mute ……. .

According to St. Erinaos, the obedience of St. Mary replaced the disobedience of her mother Eve; for the latter made the matter complicated; then came her daughter to clear it by her obedience.

According to the Theologians, in the moment Mary showed her obedience and submission to God, she received the incarnation; for it would not be possible for the incarnation to happen without her consent …… For God sanctified the human freedom.

According to St. Ambrose: [She described herself as the maidservant of the Lord, even though she was chosen to become His mother; namely the divine promise did not make her fall into pride]. And according to St. Augustine, the humble Lord Christ would never let His mother – by being pregnant with Him – fall into pride].

5-MARY'S ENCOUNTER WITH ELIZABETH:

Having become a representative of the believing humanity, or of the Church that received faith in God's promise, and bowed down for the Word of God to dwell in her; she hastened to go into the hill country, to a city of Judah (39) to encounter with Elizabeth ……..a living portrait of the Church, bearing her Groom in her, who would not seek comfort, but set forth across the generations, as though on the mountains to present her Groom to every soul in the world.

According to human reason, she should have hidden herself to ponder in the matter or to discuss it with her betrothed; but, having been pregnant with Him who carries the worries of the whole world, and who ordains every issue, Mary did not think about her own worries, but, by the spirit of ministry, she set forth to the hills, to the city of Judah to serve Elizabeth.

If we bear our Christ in us, we should come out of our 'ego', set forth by a wide heart with love for all, to serve everyone. In that blessed encounter we notice:

a-According to human reason, the poor searches for the rich; the needy for him who fulfills his needs; and the student for his teacher; but according to the divine reason, it is the great who searches for the little to embrace him with love, and to carry him on his shoulders ……... So it was God who loved us first; who initiated love, and descended to us, because we cannot ascend to Him …….. He bows down to lift us up from the dust, from the depths to His heavens, to bring us forth into the bosoms of the Father; and once He dwells in us, we will hasten toward the weak to serve them.

According to the scholar Origen: [The privileged go forth to the less privileged. So did the Savior when He went to John to sanctify the baptism……And Mary, once she heard the message of the angel that she is going to be pregnant with the Savior, and that her relative Elizabeth is pregnant, "***She arose and went into the hill country with haste, to a city of Judah, and entered into the house of Zecharias, and greeted Elizabeth"*** (39, 40)…… Jesus, while still in the womb of the virgin, hastens to sanctify John the Baptist, while also still in his mother's womb]. And according to St. Ambrose: [He who is more exalted goes to

who is less exalted: Mary went to Elizabeth; and Jesus went to John, intending to sanctify his baptism by Himself, to get baptized in it].

Bearing our Holy Christ in us, we become holy, and set forth everywhere, longing for all to be holy together with us.

b-According to the scholar Origen:[Mary, worthy of becoming the mother of God, had to ascend up to the hills, and stay in the heights]. And according to St. Ambrose: [It is not strange for her, who became filled with God, to ascend up high].

c-Having been pregnant with the Word of God the Lover of mankind, Mary's encounter with Elizabeth came to be very gentle, bearing the spirit of ministry in humility. Hence St. Ambrose, interpreting the gospel of Matthew, seeks from the virgins to learn from St. Mary her gentleness, humility, and respect for the elders ……. How much we need today to perceive that being granted the graces of God, the priestly ranks in particular, should motivate us toward the humble ministry, with no intention for getting honor or authority, but with longing to wash the feel of others.

d-Mary entered into the house of Elizabeth bearing her Groom in her womb; and according to the Evangelist Luke: "***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"*** (41)

I wish, in our visits and encounters with others, we bear to them our Holy Christ, who would exult their inner bodies, and kindle His Holy Spirit in them; instead of bearing to them evil thoughts and words of judgment, to fill them with sorrow, and quench the Spirit in them.

According to scholars, the word "leaped" in Hebrew, came to mean (danced), the same word used to describe David's dance before the ark of the covenant.

+ Once the babe John, while still in his mother's womb, was filled with the Holy Spirit, his mother Elizabeth was also filled with the Holy Spirit.

(The scholar Origen)

+ The blessings of Mary's visit, with the presence of the Lord, was instantly apparent. Even though Elizabeth was the first to hear Mary's greetings, but it was babe John who was the first to have the grace …… Elizabeth was the first to know the coming of Mary, but it was John who felt the presence of Christ. The woman felt the presence of the woman; but the fetus felt the presence of the fetus. And while the two women spoke of the grace, the two fetuses were fulfilling inside, the work of the divine mercies. The babe leaped first, then the mother got filled; and not the other way round.

(St. Ambrose)

+ Having been filled with the Holy Spirit, John was sanctified while still in his mother's womb, to be able to baptize the Lord.

He did not grant the Spirit; but he preached Him who does; saying:

"***I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me ……He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire"*** (Matthew 3: 11)…….

Why with fire? For the Holy Spirit came down in the form of tongues of fire (Acts 2: 3). Concerning this the Lord said: "***I came to send fire on the earth, and how I wish it is already kindled"*** (Luke 12: 49)

e-If the exultation of the fetus in the womb refers to the inner spiritual fruition in the soul, the body, as well partakes with the soul of this fruition; hence Elizabeth's tongue set forth to proclaim what went on inside her, in harmony with it, saying:

"***Then she spoke out with a loud voice and said, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. But why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For indeed, as soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy. Blessed is she who believed, for there will be a fulfillment of those things which were told her from the Lord"*** (42-45)

While the whole world was not aware of the enunciation of the good news to St. Mary, St. Elizabeth proclaimed Mary's motherhood of her Lord; despite the absence of any outer sign of that divine event. …….. It is amazing how all those events, from the leaping of the babe for joy; to Elizabeth being filled with the Holy Spirit, and her testimony to Mary's motherhood of her Lord;

all occurred once Elizabeth heard Mary's voice of greeting; as though the Son of God who dwelt in St. Mary's womb has Himself talked on the tongue of His mother, and acted through her.

Elizabeth blessed Mary for becoming a mother of God through the incarnation of the Word; So the Church did along the generations. St. Cyril the Great, addressing the fathers in the council of Ephesus, said: [Blessed is Mary, mother of God, the royal treasure of the whole world; the unquenched lamp; the crown of virginity; the scepter of Orthodoxy; the unperceivable temple; the unlimited dwelling place; the mother and virgin. Blessed are you, who bore the Infinite in your holy womb].

Commenting on the words uttered by Elizabeth, the scholar Origen says: [What good have I done to deserve the coming of the mother of my Lord to me? ……Am I a saint?! ……What perfection or inner faithfulness, by which I became worthy of getting such a privilege?!]. So did St. Ambrose with almost the same words.

6-THE VIRGIN'S HYMN OF PRAISE:

As the tongue of Elizabeth set forth blessing the virgin Mary, for believing the divine promises, and for bearing the Word of God in her womb; so did the tongue of the virgin to praise God. The encounter of the two women so turned into a practice of a life of worship on an angelic level of praise, to glorify God, and to proclaim His exalted secrets with joy.

*"**Mary said: My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior"*** (46, 47)

According to the scholar Origen: [Before John's birth, Elizabeth prophesied. And before the birth of our Savior Lord, Mary prophesied. As sin started by the woman (eve) and moved along to the man (Adam); So did the salvation in the world through women, who have overcome the weakness of their sex. Let us meditate in the prophecy uttered by the virgin, saying: *"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior",* to see how both the soul and the spirit partake og the glorification ……].

While Eve have done wrong toward her Creator when she distorted her spirit by disobedience, and corrupted the good creation of God; and her life no longer glorified the Creator, nor her depths proclaimed His splendor; There came Mary, bearing the Word of God in her womb, to restore to her soul her first beauty; and to have her spirit rejoice in having back the image and the likeness of God.

According to the scholar Origen: [A question may arise: How could my soul magnify the Lord, who is unchangeable, and does not receive any increase or decrease?!..... How could Mary say: "*My soul magnified the Lord"?!.....* The more magnificent, and more splendid, my image of my soul spiritually become, by my good works, thoughts, and words, I would magnify the image of God. And as the image of God become more splendid in us; If we sin, this image becomes smaller and fades out ……]. Then he goes on to proclaim our commitment, as it came in the book of Deuteronomy, not to make an image of man or beast; namely our commitment to have the image of God inside us, and not that of any other, saying: [When we are deep in evil pleasure, we wear on our face the mask of a goat.

Saying: ***"My spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior",*** bears an important Theological concept: that St. Mary, with her great exaltation, is in need of salvation as any other human; for being, herself born, she bears the original serious sin, which we inherited from our first parents Adam and Eve.

Perceiving the secret of her enjoyment of the divine grace, St. Mary said:

"***He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant"*** (48).

She did not say that God regarded her prayers, fasts, watching, justice, or wisdom, but "***has regarded the lowly state of his maidservant".*** She recognized the way by which to set forth to the mercies of God, and (to take by force) His gifts, which is 'humility'. If the devil has lost his status through pride, he made pride a snare by which he catch all men into the kingdom of his darkness, to deny him his Creator, the source of his life, and the cause of his gladness.

"***For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed; for He who is mighty has done great things for me, And holy is His name, and His mercy is on those who fear Him"*** (48 – 50).

St. Mary perceived the greatness of the gift given to her, that she enjoyed the Grantor of gifts Himself, to carry in her womb; henceforth, all generations (all believers along the eras) will call her blessed for the sake of what God has done for her …….
And behold, the liturgies of the Church is loaded with her blessing, to proclaim the work of God in and with her, by the incarnation of the Word the Savior of the world from her.

We call her blessed along the generations, not as living and dying a virgin, but as a virgin in whom the exalted salvation work of God was transfigured. Every believer looking at her sees the exalted grace of God granted to mankind. …….. If the virgin has enjoyed the motherhood to the Lord Christ, carrying Him incarnate in her womb; as well as, by faith, in her heart; the soul that enjoys fellowship with God, enjoys, as well, some kind of motherhood; hence, according to father Methodeus: [The Church is in a state of labor, until Christ is conformed and delivered in us. Every saint who enjoys fellowship with Christ, is, as though Christ is born in him anew].

According to St. Ambrose: [Make sure to consummate the will of God the Father, to be (a mother) to Christ (Mark 3: 35)].

And commenting on the rest of the hymn of the virgin, saying: ***"He has shown strength with His arm; He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts",*** St. Cyril the Great says: [By the "arm" Mary refers to the Lord Jesus Christ to whom she gave birth; and by "the proud", to the devil and his hosts, seduced by haughtiness, to bring them down to the pit of humiliation and misery. And by the "proud", she may also refer to the Greek savants who rejected the (foolishness) of Christianity, as they claimed; and to the Jews who did not believe in Jesus Christ, and ended up scattered all over the earth.

"He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted the lowly" (52).

The authority of the devil and his hosts have been deteriorated; as they no longer hold the corners of the world, nor keep the human race in their captivity. And the Jewish scribes and Pharisees have fallen down from their exalted earthly glory, for they were too proud to believe in the Lord Christ. The hosts of the devil, the wise of the Greek, the scribes and Pharisees of the Jews, have all drowned in the sea of vain greatness, and false haughtiness; were humiliated by God, who exalted over them those with lowly hearts, and pure conscience, who were given the authority to trample on the serpents and scorpions, and all the power of the enemy ; and nothing, by any means hurt them (Luke 10: 19); nor the mean plots of those proud shall affect them.

The Jews who were before a widely extended nation; because of their nonbelief, they were brought down to where they are now. While the Gentiles, by their faith could occupy a high and exalted position.

"He has filled the hungry with good things; and the rich He has sent away empty" (53).

By "the hungry", is meant (mankind); for all men except the Jews fall short of the glory of God, and tasted the bitterness of hunger. No one but the Jews enjoyed the sweetness of the law, had their minds educated by the teachings of the apostles and prophets; and "*to whom pertain the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises"* (Romans 9: 4). And yet, they were moved by their arrogance down to the pit of haughtiness and pride; and refused to worship the incarnate God. No wonder, that they got back to their lack of faith, knowledge, hope, and grace; they were despised by the earthly Jerusalem, and driven away from the newly appeared life of glory and grace, on account of that they rejected the authority of life; crucified the Lord of glory, denied themselves the Fountain of Living water, and did not perceive the value of the Living Bread coming down from heaven. No wonder that, after all that, that they tasted a hunger not compared to any other hunger; and their tongues were burnt by thirst, that no other thirst could compete; for their hunger and thirst were not material and touchable , bur mental and spiritual; or, according to the prophet Amos: "*Behold, the days are coming, says the lord God, that I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord"* (Amos 8: 11).

On the other hand, the pagans who have for long suffered the spiritual thirst, and were overwhelmed by the authority of misery; and ultimately came to believe in the true God, their souls were satisfied by the richness of the divine word, their hearts were watered by the living water; and came to enjoy the promises that were the Jews' before.

"He Has helped His servant Israel, in remembrance of His mercy" (54)

He did not help Israel according to the flesh, those who were known for pride, arrogance, and haughty nose, depending upon their belonging to great ancestors, but helped Israel according to the spirit, those who appreciate the value of the name, and work on exalting and honoring it, through trusting in God, believing in His Son, and receiving the grace of adoption from the Lord Jesus, according to the promises of God to the prophets and the Patriarchs of the old covenant.

"***He spoke to our fathers; to Abraham and to his seed forever"*** (55)

This verse also refers to the Jewish congregation in flesh, who came to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. For God, glory be to His name, promised Abraham, saying: "*In you all tribes of the earth will be blessed"*; "*for indeed He does not give aid to angels, but He does give aid to the seed of Abraham"* (Hebrew 2: 16).

Finally, the Evangelist said: "***And Mary remained with her about three months, and returned to her house"*** (56)

Commenting on this evangelic saying, the scholar Origen says: [If Mary's coming to Elizabeth, and her greeting she gave her, were enough to make the fetus in the womb of Elizabeth leap for joy; and Elizabeth to prophesy after being filled with the Holy Spirit ……. If that happened in just one hour, we can imagine the great progress that happened to John all along the three months of Mary's stay with Elizabeth. If during a single moment, the fetus exulted and leaped in his mother's womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, how much would John and Elizabeth increase in spiritual growth during the long stay of the mother of God, and the Savior Himself is present?!..... During those three months John was growing in the arena of heroes while still in his mother's womb, preparing him for an amazing birth, and a more amazing future!.....; to live in the wilderness until the time came for him to appear to the children of Israel]

With the same meaning, St. Ambrose said: [What stature, we can imagine, would the fetus in his mother's womb, reach with St. Mary living in his house for such a long time?! …….That was how the prophet got the holy anointment, to be prepared for the great battle.

7-THE BIRTH OF JOHN:

"*Now Elizabeth's full time came for her to be delivered, and she brought forth a son. When her neighbors and relatives heard how the Lord had shown great mercy to her, they rejoiced with her"* (57, 58)

Having enjoyed God's compassion and grace (John) in her womb; and having been filled with the Holy Spirit; that was practically translated in the appearance of babe John in the full time, for which many rejoiced. …… So we are committed to translate what we bear of divine graces in our depths, into outer fruition that bring joy to the heavenly and earthly creatures.

John's birth brought joy and true gladness to the hearts, to set forth to praise God. According to St. Ambrose: [In the birth of the saints, joy comes upon all; for it is a blessing to all].

"***So it was, on the eighth day that they came to circumcise the child; and they would have called him by the name of his father, Zecharias; His mother answered and said: 'No! he shall be called John; ……. And his father asked for a writing tablet, and wrote, saying: 'his name is John'"*** (58-60; 63).

They both said the child will be called john without any prior consultation; and,

"***Immediately Zecharias' mouth was opened, and his tongue loosed, and he spoke praising God"*** (64).

Once the Spirit of God came to receive the leadership of the situation, the couple – Zecharias and Elizabeth – not had a mutual fruit (John), but came to have the same mind in the Lord.

We can also say that once the spirit of the Lord receives the leadership of our life, Elizabeth (our body) will become in harmony with Zecharias (our soul), to work together with one holy mind.

Anyway, if God did not deny the parents the right to name their son -- as they have done that with their complete freedom; even though the name was from the Lord and through His guidance – Once God receives our life, He cares for us, even for naming us; the way He called Abram Abraham, Sarai Sarah, and Jacob Israel, etc.

Now, as Zacharias mouth was immediately opened, his tongue loosed, and he spoke praising God (64)

"Then fear came on all who dwell around them, and all these sayings were discussed throughout all the hill country of Judea; and all those who heard them kept them in their heads, saying, 'What kind of child will this be?'; and the hand of the Lord was with him" (65, 66).

When we enjoy God's compassion, our inner mouth will be opened, and our tongue will exult and praise the Lord, not by human words, but by the power of God, that fear will come on all who dwell around us. The true believer, through getting in touch with God, bears joy and gladness, and his life would wholly turn into a praising inner mouth; a praise that would shake the heavenly creatures with joy, and destroy the devil …… as though the power of God would be transfigured in him.

The birth of John became some kind of preaching; even though it started vague, but "the hand of the Lord", namely "The Son Word", accompanied and supported him, as he set forth to the wilderness; there to sustain and care for him, until the predesigned time come for him to appear to Israel.

8-THE PROPHECY OF ZECHARIAS THE PRIEST:

Having enjoyed the compassion and grace of God (John), the tongue of Zecharias the priest, under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, set forth to bless the Lord for he realized that the salvation plan of God will not cover him alone, nor just his family, but will embrace all. The Evangelist say:

"Now his father Zecharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied saying: 'Blessed is Lord God of Israel, for He has visited and redeemed His people" (68)

Commenting on this, the scholar Origen says:[When Zecharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, he uttered two general prophesies: the first concerns Christ, and the second concerns John the Baptist and his appearance. It so appears from his words that he talks about the Savior as actually set and present in the world; then goes on to talk about John].

According to St. Ambrose: [The man who was mute for a long time, now prophesies. That is how the fullness of the grace of God turns the deniers (the doubters) into glorifiers of Him! …… I wish no man loses his trust, nor despair when he meditate in his past sins; when he remembers te divine blessings].

Prophesying about the Lord Christ, Zecharias says:

And has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David, as He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets, who had been since the world began" (69, 70)

According to St. Jerome, [The 'horn' in the Holy Book means (a kingdom or authority)] and St. Gregory the Nezianzen says: [when we were cast down, a horn for the sake of our salvation was raised]. And according to St. Cyril the Great: [The word 'horn' refers, not only to power, but also to the royal authority. For Christ our Savior, who came from the house of king David, is the King of kings, and the great power of the Father]. And according to the scholar Origen: [The summit of salvation has indeed come from the house of David; for the prophecy came as an echo of the saying: Honor was planted on the summit; what summit! …….. Jesus Christ about whom is written: "*He raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David"; as He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets"].*

"***That we should be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all who hate us"*** (71)

According to the scholar Origen:[He does not mean our material enemies, but the spiritual ones. Actually Jesus came strong in the battle, to destroy all our enemies, and to save us from their snares, and to free us from those who hate us].

"To perform the mercy promised to our fathers; and to remember His holy covenant" (72)

According to St. Gregory the Great: [Christ is both mercy ang justice; for by Him we have got the mercy to be justified by forgiving our sins through our faith in Him]. And according to the scholar Origen: [I think that the coming of the Lord was for the benefit of our fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, by being forgiven by God. For, it would be impossible for those men who have prophesied about that day, and who rejoiced in it, not to benefit by the coming of the Savior, and His miraculous birth].

The coming of the Savior proclaims the mercy of God to our fathers, and fulfills His persistent promises that appeared very clearly in the days of Abraham, with whom God entered into a holy covenant, and a vow, saying:

"The oath which He swore to our father Abraham, to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of **our enemies, might serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life"** (73 - 75).

That covenant which was fulfilled by the coming of Christ, bears two things: The first is to conquer our spiritual enemies, namely the hosts of darkness, without fear. The Lord actually destroyed their snares and broke down their authority under our feet, if we bear Him inside us. The second part, which goes hand in hand with the first, is our entrance into the inheritance, by worshipping the Lord with holiness and righteousness; namely bearing a new nature by which we live all the days of our life.

As to the prophecy about John the Baptist, Zecharias said:

"And you, child, , will be called 'The prophet of the Highest', for you will go before the face of the Lord, to prepare His ways; to give knowledge of salvation to His people, by the remission of their sins, through the tender mercy of our God with which the Dayspring from on high has visited us, to give light to those who sit in the darkness, and the shadow of death; to guide our feet into the way of peace" (76 – 79)

The following are the comments of some of our fathers on this prophecy:

+ "*And you child, will be called 'The prophet of the Highest"* (76). I wish you would notice, as well, that Christ is "*the Highest"*, and that John the Baptist goes before Christ in his birth and work. Why then would the Godhead of Christ be denied by som?! (he means the followers of 'Arius').

"*To give light to those who sit in the darkness and the shadow of death"* (79). John was a shining light in the midst of Judea; as it was written: "*I will prepare a lamp for My anointed"* (Psalm 132: 17)

And in the statutes of Moses, one of the lamps in the tabernacle of meeting was perpetually lighted, as a symbol of John the Baptist.

Yet, after gathering together around the baptism of John for some time, the Jews deserted and forsook him, and did their best to put off that shining lamp. No wonder that Christ Himself described John the Baptist, by saying- *He was the burning and shining lamp, and you were willing for a time to rejoice in his light"* (John 5: 35)

"*To guide our feet into the way of peace"* (79). The world was confused in the ways of darkness and the clouds of shameful ignorance, which kept the people from recognizing the Lord Christ, the Redeemer, God of the truth and justice; But the Lord of all has ultimately appeared to the Israelites as a Light and a Sun to their souls.

(St. Cyril the Great)

+ I believe that Zecharias hastened to address the child, for he knew that he will be taken to live in the wilderness; and that he will be denied the enjoyment of his presence; as it so actually happened:

"So the child grew and became strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his manifestation to Israel" (80).

Moses, as well, lived in the deserts after his escape from the land of Egypt, when he was 40 years of age …….;
But John the Baptist did since his birth; he, who was described as the greatest among all those born by women, and was worthy of a superb way of culture.

(The scholar Origen)

+ Some may see some exaggeration in so addressing a babe of 8 days; but we can perceive how this would be possible, if we remember how he as a fetus in his mother's womb, heard the voice of St. Mary, before his birth. Being a prophet, prophets have other ears which are opened by the Holy Spirit, rather than by the growth of the body. John was definitely capable of understanding, having leaped exultantly in his mother's womb.

(St.Ambrose)

==========

CHAPTER 10

THE SECOND MISSION

If the first mission concerning the twelve apostles, represents the ministry to the Jews, the second mission concerning the seventy disciples represents the ministry to the Gentiles. Our Lord Jesus Christ seeks their friendship with no discrimination. That is why we see the Lord Christ rejoiced in the Spirit for the sake of the simple – of whatever race they are-- who enjoy the grace of knowledge;……..We see Him present the parable of the good Samaritan, to proclaim the concept of brotherhood to all humanity; ……and, in the episode of Martha and Mary, we see Him reveal to us that He accepted all kinds of ministry and worship.

1-	The Lord appoints seventy disciples to preach	1 - 20
2-	The Lord, rejoiced in the Spirit	21 - 24
3-	The Lord gives the parable of the good Samaritan	25 – 37
4-	Martha, who works, and Mary, who contemplates	38 – 43

1- THE LORD APPOINTS SEVENTY DISCIPLES TO PREACH:

In the first mission, the commandment of the Lord to the twelve apostle was: "*Do not go into the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter a city of the Samaritans"* (Matthew 10: 5).whereas to the seventy disciples, the commandment to preach, not confined to a specific people or nation was: "*Preach the kingdom of God; say that the kingdom of heaven is at hand; and heal the sick; and whatever house you enter, stay there, and from there depart*" (2 – 4). The words:

"Eat and drink such things as they give" (7)

came to mean not to doubt any kind of food presented to them by the Gentiles, and not to fear being defiled, according to the law of Moses; ……By having a wide mind to eat whatever those Gentiles set before them, they can present to them the Word of preaching the Kingdom without hindrance ……. It is not a time for clean and unclean food, but for drawing the souls away from eternal perdition.

The second mission most probably represented preaching to the Gentiles; for it is well known that the inhabitants of the city to which the Lord went after Galilee were of the Gentiles; and that the Evangelist Luke, himself was among the seventy disciples.

Anyway, writing to the Jews, the Evangelist Matthew – of the twelve apostles – did not refer to this mission; whereas the Evangelist Luke who wrote to the Gentiles referred to it.

If the twelve represent the twelve wells of water, the seventy represent the seventy palm trees in the new Elim (Exodus 15: 27). And if the twelve represent the twelve tribes, the seventy represent the seventy elders chosen by Moses (Numbers 11: 16-25), or the seventy members of the Senhedrim.

The Lord probably chose the seventy disciples before the feast of the tabernacles, when the Jews offered seventy sacrifices …… as though He intended to present to the world a new feast, in which He offers the disciples as living sacrifices, holy, acceptable to God (Romans 12: 1), on the altar of love through preaching to the whole world..

In this mission it is to be noticed:

a-"***After these things, the Lord appointed seventy others also, and sent them two by two before His face, into every city and place where He Himself was about to go"*** (1)

According to some fathers like St. Ambrose, the number of the disciples sent on the second mission were 72, and the Evangelist mentioned the round number …… The Lord sent them two by two, the way He previously sent

the twelve apostles (Mark 6:7); for *"two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labor; and if one of them falls, he will be lifted up by his companion. But woe to him who is alone when he falls, for he has no one to help him up"* (Ecclesiastes 4: 9, 10). And according to St. Augustine, the figure 2 refers to love toward God and men; as though the mission was not only one of words and sermons, but of love and fellowship with God and men. He sent them before His face to prepare the way for Him; ……. to be under His care while caring for others.

b-Confirming to them that preaching is His own work, having appointed them as laborers to the account of His harvest, He says:

"***The harvest truly is great, but the laborers are few; therefore pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest" (*2)**

And according to St. Augustine: [The Lord Himself, dwelling in the apostles, is He who sows, and who crops; and "*without Him they could do nothing"* (John 15: 5).

c-"Go your way, behold, I send you out as lambs among wolves: (3)

This commandment to them reveals that He is the Sender ***"I send you";*** He works in them, and is responsible for them; and that His mission is not an easy one, a way paved with roses, but is one in which He sends few lambs among wolves. And according to St. Augustine: [By devouring the lambs, wolves turn into lambs, through the meekness of His lambs, namely His apostles; which is the goal of this mission]. As according to St. John Chrysostom: [Above anything else, the Lord knows the nature of things: that viciousness is not quenched by viciousness but by compassion].

Commenting on this commandment, St. Ambrose says: [Not fearing for the safety of His flock from the wolves, the Good Shepherd sent His disciples, not to be preys, but to preach by the grace; …….He would never allow the wolves to do anything against His lambs, but to fulfill the prophecy written: "*The wolf and lamb shall feed together"* (Isaiah 65:25).

If the Word of God became a Lamb for our sake, it was said about Him on the tongue of St. John the Baptist: "*Behold, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world"* (John 1: 29); and was described by St. John the Theologian: "*For the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd and lead them to living fountains of water; and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes"* (Revelation 7: 17). No marvel, then, that He makes out of His Church a little flock, saying: "*Do not fear little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasures to give you the kingdom"* (Luke 12: 32). If the Lamb of God has set us lambs to carry His features in us, He is the Sender of lambs, to whom God the Father is pleased to grant His eternal kingdom.

d-"***Carry neither money bag, knapsack, nor sandals"*** (4)

The same commandment He previously gave to the twelve apostles; on which we presented the comments of some fathers (Luke 9: 3; Matthew 10: 9; Mark 6: 8); We said that it does not imply any deprivation; for He presented Himself as the source of their satisfaction, before demanding from them to forsake these temporal things. …….. To those comments, we add; According to St. Ambrose: [To avoid the wolves, the Lord command us: "*Carry neither gold, nor silver, nor copper in your money belts, nor bag for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor staffs"* (Matthew 10: 9, 10).

If the Lord, therefore, forbids you to carry gold, what would it be if you rob or steal it?!..... If He commanded you to give your own wealth, how would you accumulate what is not yours?!..... "*You, therefore who preach that a man should not steal, do you steal?! ……...You who say: Do not commit adultery, Do you commit adultery?! You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law; for 'For the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you' "* (Romans 21 -24) .The apostle Peter was the first to keep the commandment of the Lord, making it clear that it is not given in vain; for when the beggar asked for an alm he said to him: "*Silver and gold, I do not have; but what I do have, I give you"* (Acts 3: 6).; While Peter is proud to have no silver or gold, would you be ashamed not to have what you desire to have?!..... It is as though Peter says to the poor man. As a disciple of the Lord, [I have neither silver nor gold, but He granted me other things that are more valuable, which I shall give you: "*In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk"* (Acts 3: 6).

"Carry neither money bag nor a knapsack" (4) As these things are made out of the skin of dead animals, the Lord Jesus, wanting us to have no dead things, previously said to Moses: "*Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground"* (Exodus 3: 5), He commanded him to take off himself the sandals of death and the earthly things, at the moment He sent him to save the children of Israel. ……The minister appointed for such work, should not fear anything that may probably make him forsake his mission for fear of death, the way Moses did when he fled to the land of Median. Aware of his intention, and seeing his weakness, God chose first to liberate his spirit and soul from the dead bonds].

According to St. Augustine: [by His command to carry neither a bag nor a knapsack, He means, do not be wise on your own, but accept the Holy Spirit, to become in you, a spring, rather than a bag or a knapsack; out of which you spend on others without limit. ……And as the sandals are normally made out of the skin of dead animals to cover our feet, the Lord commands us to deny the dead works; the way He commanded Moses – as though symbolically – saying: "*Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground"* (Exodus 3: 5). ……What is more Holy than the Church of God?!; Let us stand in her after taking off our sandals; namely after denying our dead works].

According to the scholar Origen: [Taking off the sandals refers to forsaking the dead skin from which sandals and drums are made; and not to seek the dead things, nor to care for the outer appearances which are like drums, producing only empty noise.

According to St. Clement of Alexandria, the sandals here refer to how a rich man is preoccupied with, and confused by the multitude of horses and servants he prepares for his continuous trips.

e-***"Greet no one along the road"*** (4).

By which He means that the preacher should not be distracted by an abundance of compliments without a spiritual goal.

According to St. Augustine: [Taking no bags, knapsacks, or sandals; and greeting no one along the road; should not be taken literally; but means we, as preachers, should go about our mission in a hurry, and should not be preoccupied with, or distracted by anything else until we do it.

According to St. Augustine the term 'Salutation', being derived from the term 'salvation', it is befitting of us not to present salvation along the road, namely 'by the way', but present it through works of love.

Commenting on this command, St. Ambrose says that the Lord does not forbid us to give the greeting of peace, but not to give it "along the road"; lest it would delay our work; the way the prophet Elisha ordered his servant (2 kings 4: 29). Greeting is a good habit, but the fulfillment of the divine work is better, and should not be hindered.

f-"Whatever house you enter, ……. remain in it, …… do not go from house to house" (5 – 7).

By this He intended to take away from them the vain habits of the scribes and the Pharisees at that time, who spent most of their time attending banquets on their honor. And on another aspect to make them feel in whatever house they enter, like members of the household (See our interpretation of Luke 9: 4).

g-The rest of the talk we have already interpreted…….. Wiping off the dust which cling to their feet, concerning

those who do not receive them, refers to that all what cling to them is like dust, only worth of being wiped off under feet (See our interpretation of Mark 6: 11)…… And as to that Sodom's punishment will be less bitter than that by which Chorazin and Bethsaida; it is because the foreigners will not be punished the same way as the natives; and that whoever knows less will have a lesser judgment.

Commenting on the words of the Lord here, saying:

"*Whatever city you may enter, and they do not receive you, go out into its street and say: The very dust of your city which clings to nus, we wipe off against you" (10, 11)*,

St. Augustine says: [The Lord came in the persons of His disciples; to talk through them; and to be present in them. Through His Church He comes, and through her He talks to the Gentiles. To that refer the words He uttered, saying: *"He who receives you, receives Me"* (Matthew 10: 40); and those said by the apostle Paul: "*Since you seek a proof of Christ in me"* (2 Corinthians 13: 3).

h-"Then the seventy returned with joy saying, 'Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name. And

He said to them: 'I saw Satan fall like lightening from heaven. 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. Never the less do not rejoice, in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rather rejoice because your names are written in heaven" (17 – 20).

The apostle rejoiced to see how Satan collapsed before man through preaching the kingdom; The Lord Christ, confirming that, by the cross, Satan has fallen from heaven like lightening; and confirming the authority of man by the cross ……. He referred to that we should rejoice, not in the collapse of the enemy, nor our ability to perform miracles, as much as in our enjoyment of the heavenly kingdom through the virtuous life which we gain by the grace of God. …… According to St. Anthony: [We should rejoice in that our names are written in the kingdom of heaven, as a reference to the virtuous life (in the Lord); But as to that the demons are subject to us, it is a talent given by the Lord, by which a perverted man may enjoy, and also perish.

+ Now, beloved brethren, the devil is slain, that tyrant against the whole world ……. Death will reign no more, but life will reign instead; for the Lord says: "*I am the Life"* (John 14: 6)…….. Now, as death is no more, and as the kingdom of the devil is destroyed, all are filled with joy and happiness; according to what is written: "*The Lord reigns; let the earth rejoice"* .

+ The devil has got authority over man through apostasy; that authority, therefore, will be lost by the return of man to God.

+ Through passion, *The Lord ascended on high, led captivity captive; and gave gifts to men"* (Psalm 68: 18; Ephesians 4: 8); and granted those who believe in Him the authority to trample upon the serpents and the scorpions, and all the power of the enemy; namely, the authority over the leader of the apostasy.

(St. Erinaos)

+ What could be a more serious collapse than that of the devil who gut puffed up with pride?! And a more exalted height than that of man who intends to be humble?!..... The former came to crawl on the ground underneath our feet; and the later soared up to be with the angels in the heights.

(St. John Chrysostom)

+ Commenting on how we should rejoice to be members in the kingdom of heaven, or members in the body of Christ; rather than to rejoice in that we have got the authority over the devil; St. Augustine says:

[It is far better for you to be just a finger in the body, than to be an eye outside the body].

(St. Augustine)

+ The coming of Christ has poured over humanity the exalted gift of the fatherly grace.

(St. Erinaos)

+ As it was necessary to break down the heads of the dragon, the Lord descended in the waters and "*bound the strong"* (Matthew 12: 29); to give us the authority to trample by Him over the serpents and the scorpions (Luke 10: 19).

It is not just a little beast, for its appearance is enough to bring terror to man; no fishing boat could endure one strike of its tail, that could crush all those who dare to approach it (Job 41: 13, 14)

Life has come to mute death; so that we who are saved, could all say: "*O death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?"* (! Corinthians 15: 55).

For by Baptism, the sting of death was crushed.

(St. Cyril of Jerusalem)

+ The Lord Christ warned His disciples against rejoicing in having the authority over the devil, performing miracles; and counseled them to rejoice instead in their enjoyment of the kingdom of heaven.

They are warned by Him who has granted them that authority to perform those amazing works, lest they would be puffed up, but rather to have the features of love..

+ As that was not realized by their own power, but by that of the name they used; hence He warned them against referring to themselves any beatitude or glory concerning it . …… As to the inner purity concerning their life and heart, because of it, their names are written in heaven.

(Father Nestorius)

2- THE LORD REJOICED IN THE SPIRIT:

In a similar text in Mathew 11: 25 – 30, we see how the Lord Christ longs to present the true knowledge to every soul; which will only be enjoyed by the simple like the children, through our Lord Jesus Christ, the simple, only begotten Son. He wishes that no one would be denied the knowledge; but those who count themselves as being 'Gnostic' (namely, knowledgeable) and wise; those who will not be able to encounter with Him to recognize the divine secrets.

+ Finally, the Son of God reveals the heavenly secret, proclaiming His grace to the children, and not to the wise of this age (Matthew 11: 25); a fact mentioned in detail by the apostle Paul, saying: "*For since in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God, through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe"* (1 Corinthians 1: 21).

He who knows how to be puffed up, or to give his words the clinging of wisdom, is counted as wise "of this age"; Whereas the child would say: "*Lord, my heart is not haughty, nor my eyes lofty, neither do I concern myself with great matters, nor things too profound for me"* (Psalm 131: 1); he may appear little, not concerning his age or mind, but by his humility; through keeping away from commendation; therefore he adds: "*Surely, I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with his mother; like a weaned child is my soul within me"* . ……Just meditate in the greatness of such a man in the words of the apostle: "*Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you seems to be wise in this age, let him become a fool, that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this age is foolishness with God"* (1 Corinthians 3: 18, 19).

(St. Ambrose)

+ ***"All things have been delivered to Me by My father; and no one knows who the Son is, except the Father, and who the Father is except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him"*** (22).

The word "All", shows us the greatness of the Son; that He is no different from His Father.

And the word "delivered" does not mean that He has got it as a gift or grace, but got it by nature through the unity of essence.

(St. Ambrose)

+ Here he talks about a specific kind of knowledge (through the unity of essence), which no one else has.

(St. John Chrysostom)

+ He did not say “reveal”, concerning only the future, but the Son started to reveal about the Father when He was born by S t. Mary; and continued to do through several ways along the generations. The Son is there …… reveals about the Father to all, to whom the Father will, and intends to reveal.

(St.Erinaos)

+ The apostle Paul learned faith, not just by words (a knowledge by talk), but enjoyed the riches of the Spirit, that illuminated his soul, and made Christ speak in him.

(St. John Chrysostom)

+ The new minds became wise with a new kind of wisdom, which came into existence through the new covenant, when the old foolishness was taken away.

(St. Clement of Alexandria)

From that we perceive that the new wisdom, in which Jesus rejoiced, is given to us in Jesus Christ, through taking off our old man, and enjoying the new man, who is according to the image of our Creator.. Through this new man, namely through our unity with God in Jesus Christ, we would become the children of God, and come to know His divine secrets.

Commenting on the enjoyment of the children of the wisdom, St. Clement of Alexandria says: [Are we truly children of God; …….have we truly forsaken the old man; …….have we taken off the garment of evil, and put on the eternity of Christ, ……to become a new holy people, through the new birth; and to keep our man undefiled; ….....and, as children, have we become cleansed of adultery?!].

Let us, therefore be children in truth, by taking off the garment of evil, and by walking as the children of God, so that the Lord would grant us His secrets, and would rejoice for the sake of the wisdom He grants us.

3- THE PARABLE OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN:

If God in His love longs for every soul, we saw our Lord Jesus Christ rejoice by Spirit for the sake of the enjoyment by the simple of the grace of the spiritual knowledge. And lest the Jews would think that that grace is only confined on their race, the Lord gave the parable of ‘The Good Samaritan’ to proclaim the sound concept of general brotherhood for the good-hearted man; that how would it be befitting of God to love all mankind, whom He created by His own hands, with no discrimination between races or languages.

“*And behold, a certain lawyer stood up and tested Him, saying: ‘Teacher what shall I do to inherit eternal life?’ He said to him: ‘What is written in the law? What is your reading of it?. So he answered and said’ You shall love your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself’. And He said to him: ‘You have answered rightly, do this and you will live’. But he, wanting to justify himself, said to Jesus: ‘And who is my neighbor?”* (25 – 29)

The parable of the good Samaritan is undoubtedly one of the important landmarks of the gospel according to Luke, for what it includes of deep spiritual and theological concepts. But Luke intended to mention it through the circumstances that surrounded uttering it, which make the parable more splendid and beautiful; as we cannot appreciate the value of light unless we experience the darkness; and no one knows the value of good health except him who tasted illness.

We can summarize the circumstances around this parable in the following points:

a- **“*A certain lawyer stood up and tasted Him”* (**25).

That lawyer, most probably envied the Lord for the authority he saw in Him, in His words and works, something that amazed the people and made them gather around Him; for although He was not a graduate of the traditional school of ‘Morash’, He forced Himself through the rows of the Jewish scholars, even surpassed them, and came to be a danger on them by His spiritual teachings and exalted concepts……. That lawyer, a teacher of the law, courteously stood up “to ask” the Lord; yet in his heart “to test” Him -- the same expression came concerning Satan (Luke 4: 22) …….. That lawyer bore the image of piety, when he

actually had the heart of the devil within him. But the Lord is capable to "*out of the eater came something to eat, and out of the strong, came something sweet"* (Judges 14: 14).

b- ***"Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"*** (25).

A question that, in its depths, came to reveal what dwelt upon the Jewish nation; for despite what they have in their hands of the holy books that included the law and the prophesies, yet the teachers themselves felt helpless to reach the inner comfort, or to enjoy life. ……. Hence he did not ask the Lord: 'What shall I learn?' or 'What shall I teach the others?' but asked Him: "*What shall I do*?!" ……The Jews practice a multitude of rites and worships, including sacrifices, offerings, and prayers; but, because of thirst, the question remains "*What shall I do?"* …….No one will enjoy satisfaction, unless he receives the Lord Christ Himself, being "the eternal Life" as the secret of satisfaction.

That lawyer, most probably intending to set a snare for the Lord; expected that He will present new commandments of His own, to accuse Him of breaking the Mosaic law and despising the ten commandments.

c- But the Lord, not giving him the chance to accuse Him of breaking the law; asked him what is written in the law, by which He confirmed His care for the commandments, giving them a deep new concepts.

Even though the Lord was, for sure, aware of the hidden intentions of that lawyer, yet He did not offend him, but even commended him, saying: "*You have answered rightly". …….. He did not pay evil back with evil, bu event used compassion to gain him.*

d- The fathers of the Church presented to us many interpretations of the parable of "the good Samaritan". On the behavioral side, The Lord intended to show our commitment to have a wide heart to receive all mankind, of all races, as our "neighbors"(relatives); as according to St. Jerome: [We are all relatives of each others, for having one father]; and to the Scholar Origen: Relationship does not stop at the limit of blood, nor at the kind of work, but is set on keeping the commandment of love and mercy, saying: [Jesus teaches that that man who went down from Jerusalem, was only a neighbor of him who keeps the commandments, and who is ready to help, summarizing that in asking:

e- ***"Which of these three do you think was neighbor to him who fell among the thieves?"*** (36)

Neither the priest nor the Levi was, but, according to the answer of the lawyer himself:
"He who showed mercy on him"; Then Jesus said to him: "***Go and do likewise"*** (37)]

According to St. Sverus of Antioch: [We, out of ignorance, often assume that he who belongs to your religion or nationality, is our "neighbor"; but I say to you that he who is your partner in human nature is your neighbor. …….. As you can see, how he who raised his head high boasting in his priestly attire, and was proud of being called a priest or a Levi, did not think that the one fallen in the hands of thieves, naked, and covered with almost deadly wounds, was a fellow man, a neighbor; but despised him as a piece of stone on the side of the road. Whereas the Samaritan, who did not have the commandments of the law, and whom the Jews considered foolish and ignorant (according to the words: "*Those who dwell in the mountains of Samaria ….and the ignorant people who dwell in Sechem"* (Wisdom of Joshua); That Samaritan, knew the human nature, and understood who is the "neighbor". ……The identification of the "neighbor" therefore, should not be confined to the narrow measures of race; but on whomever we love].

And in a talk by St. Ambrose about "repentance", he, responding to the followers of 'Novatius' who refused to receive those who returned back after denying faith under the pressure of execution, said: [The good Samaritan did not go on his way, leaving the man whom the thieves left almost dead, but bandaged his wounds, poured on them oil and wine, set him on his chest, (namely took upon himself all his sins); the way Jesus, the Good Shepherd did not despise His lost sheep …….. You made themselves foreigners from him

by your pride and vain boasting; and by not holding fast to the Head, to whom all the members of the body are knit together by joints and ligaments (2 Corinthians 2: 18, 19).For if you (followers of Novatius) hold fast to the head, you would not leave him, for whose sake Christ died; if you hold fast to the head, you would care for the whole body, and for the bond between the members without discrimination, growing by God, with the bond of love and the salvation of the sinners (Colossians 2: 19). But refusing to accept the repentance, you would be saying: [In our inn no wounded will be received, and no ill will be healed; We do not care for the ill, for we are all well, and need no physician; for He (the Lord) Himself said: "*Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick"* (Mark 2: 17)].

To the spiritual and symbolic interpretation, in which the fathers abundantly talked, I shall concisely refer as follows:

"A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves who stripped him of his clothing, wounded him and departed, leaving him half dead" (30).

a- ***A man"*** : According to St. Sverus: [Our Savior did not say 'men went down', but "***a man went down";*** for the issue concerns the whole humanity, that, because of the disobedience of Adam, fell from the high and secure dwelling place in paradise, truly called "Jerusalem", meaning (peace and vision of God), down to "Jericho", a city in a low extremely hot valley. …… The episode of the man fallen into the hands of thieves, is that of every human soul that went down from paradise through Adam, the first man, who lost "the peace and the vision of God".

b- ***"went down from Jerusalem to Jericho"***. According to the scholar Origen: [According to an earlier interpretation of one of the fathers: "The man" who went down represents (Adam), "Jerusalem" represents (the paradise); "Jericho" represents (the world); "the priest" represents (the law); "the Levi" represents (the prophets); "the Samaritan" represents (Christ); "the wounds" represent (the disobedience); "the animal" represents (the body of Christ); "the inn" open before everyone who wishes to enter, represents (the Church); "the two denarii" represent (the Father and the Son); "the innkeeper" represents (the head of the Church); and "the promise of the Samaritan to come back" is (an anticipation of the second coming of Christ)].

Those symbols presented by the scholar Origen in the second century BC, quoted from an earlier interpretation, probably by his spiritual mentor: St. Clement of Alexandria, or his predecessor: St. Pentinus, reveal to us the general perception of the early Church of the parable of the good Samaritan.

Quoting that same interpretation, St. Ambrose talks to us in some detail about 'Jericho' to which humanity went from 'Jerusalem', namely from paradise, down to the world; 'Jericho', a city which was surrounded by high walls, from which no one escaped except those embraced by the harlot Rahab, who, by faith, received the two spies sent by Joshua, and hid them on the rooftop of her house, among the stalks of flax (Joshua 2: 6)

c- ***"Fell among thieves":*** Those represent the devil with his hosts of evil angels; or by his seductions, who stand by anticipating the soul that happens to gets out of the walls of Jerusalem, even by thought for a moment, to catch for his account, to attack her by his evil angels, setting for her all kinds of snares to destroy her.

+ Whoever goes down from Jerusalem to Jericho will fall among the thieves, because he went down by his own free will …… The Savior says: "*All who came before Me are thieves and robbers"* (John 10:8).

"The wounds" inflicted on man are (the iniquities of the sin).

(The scholar Origen)

+ The captivation of the nature of man was not through a change of his location, but through changing of his behavior; for once he diverted from the heavenly commandments, and went down to the sins of the world, he was confronted by the thieves. …….”The thieves” are (the angels of the night and the darkness), who sometimes change their form to angel of light (2 Corinthians 11: 14); but cannot abide as such (angels of light), but will start to bare us of the spiritual attire of grace which we gained; and then inflict wounds on us; for, if we manage to keep the attire which we gained blameless, we would never feel the strikes of the thieves.

  Beware, lest you would be bared of the attire of faith; for that was the old knock out that would have destroyed all mankind, if it was not for the going down of the “Samaritan” to heal the deadly wounds.

  (St. Ambrose)

+ He teaches us that life of wickedness in this world separates man from God, draws him down, suffocates him by the heat of shameful evil desires, brings on him anxiety, and the closeness to death.

  As humanity fell down gradually to the pit, she was attacked by a gang of demons, who stripped her of the attire of perfection, the way done by a gang of thieves, and did not leave her with any trace of strength, nor a touch of purity, of righteousness, of wisdom, or of anything related to the divine image; and left her between life and death.

  That truly shows the depth of this parable, which is only perceived by contemplation. …… While the thieves usually start by inflicting wounds on their victim, before stripping him of his clothes; but then they are in no need to wound him any further; the demons, on the other hand, start first by stripping their victim of his attire of virtues, then would wound him without mercy even to death. For they actually have no desire for his attire, but their only desire is his loss and death; hence our Lord said with wisdom: “*They stripped him of his clothing, and wounded him”.*

  (St. Sverus of Antioch)

d- **The priest, the Levi, and the Samaritan**: If the priest represents the law, and the Levi represents the prophesies; the law and the prophesies could not possibly bandage our hidden wounds, and bring us back to the image according to which God created us; But it was only the “Good Samaritan” who represents the Lord Christ, who came down to us, carried us in His body, blessed our nature in Him, and offered to us every true healing that would renew our life.

+ The priest (the law) and the Levi (the prophets), both looked at the wounded man, departed and left him between life and death. But the divine care arranged for him to come under the care of Him, who is stronger than the law and the prophets –“the Samaritan” whose name means (the Keeper or the Watchman); for “*He who keeps Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep”* (Psalm 121: 4). ……To help that man between life and death, the Samaritan came down that road; but did not go from Jerusalem down to Jericho, like the priest and the Levi, but came down specially to save that victim and to watch over him. …… When the Jews said to Jesus: “*You are a Samaritan, and have a demon”* (John 8: 48), even though the Lord confirmed to them that He has no demon, yet did not deny that He is the Samaritan, namely the (Keeper or the Watchman).

  (The scholar Origen)

+ He who was despised by the priest and the Levi, was not despised by the Samaritan. ……So do not despise him on account of his race; for you would admire him, if you know the meaning of his name (The Keeper or the watchman); about whom it is said: “*The Lord will maintain the cause of the afflicted, and justice for the poor”* (Psalm 140: 12). He who, seeing the man between life and death, whose neighbors would not care for him, approached him, partook of his sufferings, and poured His mercy upon him, to became his true neighbor.

(St. Ambrose)

+ As humanity was cast on the ground between life and death, and within few moments she would have died; she was seen by law-givers; as referred by the priest and the Levi, but because they lacked the strength and activity, they did not care for, nor could set her up …; The apostle Paul says: "*It was symbolic for the present time in which both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make him who performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience"* (Hebrew 9: 9); "*with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy place, once and for all, having obtained eternal redemption"* (Hebrew 9: 12); That is why the Lord said:

"***Now by a chance a certain priest came down the road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side; likewise a Levite, when he arrived at the place, came and looked and passed by, on the other side"*** (31, 32).

Both the priest and the Levi, "**saw"** the man, "**looked and passed by"**, they may even thought about touching and trying to help him, but feeling that they are unable to heal him because of the seriousness of his wounds, namely his sins; they both retreated back running; which is understood by the phrase: "*(They) passed by on the other side".*

Finally He said: "***But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed came where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. So he went to him, and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine, and he set him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him"*** (31 -34).

Here the Lord Christ truly called Himself "A Samaritan", while talking to a lawyer who boasts in his knowledge of the law; He cared to show him though, that it is not the priest, nor the Levi; not one of those who believe that they walk according the commandments of Moses, and hence have the ability; ……but He Himself is the One who came to consummate the law; who is truly "the Neighbor"; to whom the commandment, saying: "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself*" (Mark 12: 31) refers; whom, the Jews reviled, saying: "*Do not we say rightly that You are a Samaritan and have a demon?"* (John 8: 48); and whom they often accused of breaking the law.

In other words, no one sees in calling the Lord Jesus "a Samaritan", something inapropriate; even though it may look as something unbefitting of His Holy majesty.

(St. Sverus of Antioch)

+ Pray for me to see Jerusalem again, leaving Babylon behind …….. I forgot the warning of the gospel to me, that whoever goes down from Jerusalem will instantly fall among the thieves, who would wound him and leave him to die. Even though I know that both the priest and the Levi would neglect me; but I know for sure that there is still the good Samaritan, to whom, when the Jews said: "*You are a Samaritan, and have a demon"* (John 8: 48), He debated against their claim that He has a demon, but not against their calling Him "A Samaritan" .

(St. Jerome)

+ "Samaritan" means (A Keeper or a Watchman); ……. "*He who keeps Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep:* (Psalm 121: 4); and, "*Unless the Lord guards the city, the watchman stays awake in vain"* (Psalm 127: 1)…… Our Watchman is our Creator.

(St. Augustine)

+ I wish no one, however hard is his fall, would fear perdition; for the Good Samaritan , the Watchman of the souls; will not "pass by him", but will have compassion on him and will heal him.

(St. Ambrose)

e- "***He bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine"*** (34)

Whenever man collapses under the heavy burden of sin, and his soul is inflicted with deep wounds, he does not need harsh words of rebuke, even though he is responsible for his wounds; but he needs Him who bandages his wounds, namely covers his weaknesses, and does not expose them before the others. He also needs oil to appease the acute pain, and not things that enflame it. As for the wine, it probably refers to chastisement; mixing it with oil means mixing the compassion with chastisement, and mercy with firmness. The wine may also refers to joy: If the soul was broken down by sin, lost her peace; and if the life of man turned into tears; our divine Physician intends to restore to us "the gladness of our salvation" anew.

+ The good Samaritan did not forsake the wounded man between life and death; because he saw in him a faint breath of life, and hoped for healing him.

  Seeing someone fallen in sin between life and death; be sure that faith can find in him a breath of life.

  Pour on his wounds oil and wine; not wine without oil; to help him endure the pains of purification; set him on your chest; bring him to the inn, and give the innkeeper two denarii to take care of him; ……be his 'neighbor'.

  (St. Ambrose)

+ The divine Physician has several medications by which He grants the healing: He bandages the wounds by His firm commandments; ……He gives warmth when He forgives; ……He pierces the heart like wine, when He proclaims His judgment; ……and He sets him on His own animal…….

  Contemplate in how He sets us (in Him); how He carried our sins and suffered for our sake (Isaiah 53: 40)……So did the Shepherd, when He carried the lost sheep on His shoulders (Luke 15: 5).

  (St. Ambrose)

+ He also pours wine; namely the Word of teaching that bandages the wounds; …….. He actually gave us the wine of repentance to drink; according to the words of the Psalm: "*You have shown your people hard things; You have made us drink the wine of confusion"* (Psalm 60:3); and as, with our serious wounds, we cannot endure the sting of the wine , He mixed it with oil.

  He used to eat together with the tax collectors and the sinners, and said to the Pharisees who rebuked, accused, and criticised him for doing this: "*I desire mercy and not sacrifice; for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance"* (Matthew 8: 13).

  (St. Sverus of Antioch)

+ We may call the body of Christ, "His animal"; for on it He set the man wounded by the thieves.

  (St. Augustine)

+ The soul that fell among the thieves, is carried on the shoulders of Christ.

  (St. Jerome)

f-"brought him to a inn, and took care of him" (34)

+ The inn is the Church which receives all people, and support anyone; according to the words of the divine (Innkeeper); "*Come to Me all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest"* (Matthew 11: 28).

  (The scholar Origen)

+ The inn is the church which receives and accommodates all people. While we no more hear – according to the narrow shadow of the law and the symbolic worship: "*An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter the assembly of the Lord"* (Deuteronomy 23: 3); We hear instead: *"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"* (Mathew 28: 19); and "*In every nation, whoever fears Him and make righteousness is accepted by Him"* (Acts 10: 35).

  After he brought him to an inn ***"he cared for him"*** (34). Namely, after the Church was formed by the gathering together of the Gentiles who were dying while worshipping a multitudes of gods; Christ Himself came to dwell in her, and to grant her every spiritual grace.

  "*For you are the temple of the living God, as God has said; I will dwell in them, and walk among them; I will be their God; and they shall be My people"* (2 Corinthians 6: 16).

  (St. Sverus of Antioch)

+ The inn is where everyone finds comfort after a long travel. The Lord takes us to the inn; for "*He raises the poor out of the dust, and lifts the needy out of the ash heap"* (Psalm 113: 7).

  (St. Ambrose)

Leaving two denarii to the account of the wounded man:

It was befitting of that good Shepherd, having brought us into His Church, being His inn where we would find comfort, As the time came for Him to depart according to the flesh, and ascend to heaven, to prepare a place for us; He did not leave us in need, but left "two denarii" to our account…….. Now, what are those two denarii?

In our previous interpretations of the books of the Old and the New Testaments, we saw, according to St. Augustine, that the figure 2 refers to 'love', being proclaimed through two commandments: the love of God, and the love of man; the two made one …… The Lord Christ, in His Church, left for us the treasure of "the divine love", by which we love God and men.

According to some fathers, the two denarii, left by the Samaritan to the innkeeper, symbolize (the apostles and the disciples) who work in the Church to the account of the Lord Christ; Or symbolize (the Holy Book with its two Testaments).

+ After bringing the wounded man to the inn, he did not depart right away, but stayed with him a whole day to bandage his wounds; not only by day, but also by night; dedicating to him all his will and possibilities; And on the next day, before he departs, He gave of his own money; namely of his own depths. Two denarii, to the innkeeper; who refers to the angel of the Church, committed to care…….. The two denarii represent (the knowledge of The Father and the Son); He gave him the secret of the Father in the Son; and of the Son in the Father.

  (The scholar Origen)

+ The two denarii symbolize (the apostles, as well as the ministers and teachers) who came after them, whom He committed to care, specifically for the sick. He gave them to the innkeeper and said to him:

  "***Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, when I come again, I will repay you"*** (35).

  They may also symbolize (the two testaments of the Holy Book) -- The first given through the law of Moses and the prophets; and the second through the gospels and the teachings of the apostles; both belong to the One God; carry the same image of the Most High King, and print the same royal image in our hearts, and abide them by the holy words; for they are truly uttered by One Spirit.

  (St. Sverus of Antioch)

+ The two denarii could probably symbolize (the two covenants), sealed by the eternal seal of the Father; and by their price we are healed from our wounds; for *"we are purchased for a high price"* (1 Peter 1:19).

  The innkeeper may refer to him who said: "I *was sent by Christ to preach"* (1 Corinthians 1: 17); or to those to whom the Lord Christ said: "*Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved, but he who does not believe will be condemned"* (Mark 16: 15, 16).

(St. Ambrose)

Finally, according to St. Erinaos, the two denarii may refer to the Holy Spirit granted to the Church, to be inscribed on the soul, previously wounded by the thieves, with the writings of the Father and the Son, being the coins and the denarii of God.

4- MARTHA, WHO WORKS, AND MARY WHO CONTEMPLATES:

If the Lord Christ, every day, carries the wounded on His shoulders, like the good Samaritan, to bring them into His Church – the heavenly inn – presents to them the Holy Spirit (the two denarii), supports them, and cares for them, until He returns to them on His ultimate second coming; …….. What should those who enter into the Church do? That is what the episode of the encounter of Martha and Mary with the Lord Christ in the village of Bethany, tells us.

We said that "Bethany" means (the house of obedience) or (the house of labor); It refers therefore, to the Church, where the members are committed to obedience to God, enduring every labor as a fellowship of the passion of the Savior; and where all work: striving like Martha, or sitting to listen to His voice, and to contemplate in His secrets like Mary. …….. We wish to confirm here, that even though Martha represents the ministers in the Church, and Mary those who listen to, and contemplate in the word of God; the Christian bears in his heart both the thought of Marta melded with that of Mary; …..For there is no true strife outside the life of contemplation; and no true life of contemplation without strife. …….Indeed, every member has his own talent. Some have a strong energy of work, capable of perpetual activity in the Lord; and some love tranquility and quietness, to live in worship and contemplation. But the former is committed, amid his strife, to have a daily portion of the life of contemplation, that would keep him from perversion in his strife; and it is befitting of the later to practice his love practically by strife, if not by a seen ministry, let it be by prayers for the sake of the Church, as well as for the entire world.

I prefer to leave the talk about the life of ministry and that of contemplation to a separate work; But here, I shall present quotations of the writings of some fathers in this concern.

+ Even though what Martha did by her service to the saints was good; yet what her sister Mary did was better, by sitting at the feet of the Lord, and listening to His words.

(St. Augustine)

+ Martha and Mary were sisters, not only according to the flesh, and also to piety; and both were attached to the Lord, and served Him when He was in the flesh. …….. The Lord chose "*to take the form of a bondservant*" (Philippians 2: 7); had a body that gets hungry and thirsty; and While He was in the wilderness, he was served by the angels (Matthew 4: 11); otherwise, He condescended to be fed by others. on whom He showed compassion, the way He showed it on the widow who took care of the prophet Elijah, whom God previously sustained through the service of a raven (2 kings 17: 6). Even though He could have continued to sustain him the same way, yet He intended to bless that pious widow through her godly service she gave to His servant.

  So , the Lord was received in the house of Martha and Mary as a guest; He who "*came to His own and His own did not receive Him; but as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of*

God" (John 1: 11, 12); He intended to adopt the ministers to make them His brothers; and to liberate the captives to make them partners in the inheritance. … However, do not be grieved that you were not born in those times, to enjoy seeing the Lord in flesh, and to have the blessing of giving Him hospitality in your houses, for He Himself said: "*Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it for Me"* (Matthew 25: 40).

+ Martha was very preoccupied with preparing food for the Lord, while her sister Mary was sitting at the feet of the Lord to listen to His words, according to the psalm saying: "*Be still and know that I am God"* (Psalm 46: 10).…… One of them was preoccupied with many things, while the other concentrated her eyes on the One.

(St. Augustine)

+ Good are the services given to the poor, the saints of God ……. But what is better is what Mary chose to do. For the former works, by necessity, have their own problems; while the later have their sweetness and are practiced with love.

If Martha felt enough satisfaction through practicing her works, she would not be in need of the help of her sister. The diverse and many things done by Martha, even though are good works, yet are all physical, temporary, and mortal. That is Why the Lord said to her: *"Mary has chosen that good part"* (42). By which He meant to say to her: [Even though you are not a bad woman, yet your sister is better]. ……Why so? "*It will not be taken away from her"* (42) For the sweetness of the truth is eternal. It will not only abide with her, but will increase, in this world, as well as in the life to come.

(St. Augustine)

+ Martha cared to feed the Lord; but Mary cared to be fed by the Lord…..

(St. Augustine)

+ In those two women, two kinds of life were presented: the present life, and that to come; a life of grief, and that of beatitude; a temporal life and an eternal life.

Talking about the life of Martha, I am not talking about some evil, or wicked life of denial; but about a kind of life full of suffering and fear, whose peace could be taken away by temptations …… I say that both lives are good, and even commendable, but one of them is rough, while the other is easy.

In Martha we see an image of the present things; and in Mary, the things to come.

What Martha does, we are doing now; and what Mary does, we hope to do. Let us do the former work well, to gain the later perfect.

(St. Augustine)

+ Like Mary. It is befitting of us to prefer the food of the soul to that of the body.

Let your sisters run here and there, to give the fitting hospitality to Christ; but as for you, leave the burden of the world behind, sit at the feet of the Lord, and say to Him: "*When I found the one I love, I held him and would not let him go"* (Song 3: 4).

(St. Jerome)

+ The Lord commands us to leave the confusion of our world, and to get attached to the One; to come close to the grace of Him who presents the eternal life.

(St. Clement of Alexandria)

+ The greatest goodness lies, not in the works themselves, however great they are, but in the contemplation in the Lord, who is, in truth, “The One”.

Saying “*the good part which will not be taken away from her”*, reveals that the part of the other sister could be taken away from her; for the physical services could not endure forever; while Mary’s longing will never be taken away from her.

(Father Moses)

+ The first strove to serve physically; while the second cared for the spiritual work of the Word of God.

Mary has chosen the good part which will not be taken away from her. I wish we too strive to have what the enemy cannot take away from us; to have the attentive ear, rather than the distracted one; for the seed of the divine Word is prone to be stolen if it falls “*by the wayside”* (Luke 8: 5, 13).

Let us be like Mary who longed to be filled with wisdom, which is the greatest and most perfect work. It is befitting of us not to let our daily worries keep us from seeking the heavenly knowledge.

The Lord did not rebuke Martha on her good works, but He preferred Mary who chose the good part. ……. Jesus has the treasures of riches, and is generous in giving an abundance of gifts; of which Mary chose the wisdom. So have the apostles done when they did not leave the Word of God to serve tables (Act 6: 2)

“Wisdom” is the main foundation of the whole work; and because St. Steven was filled with wisdom, he was chosen for ministry ……The body of the Church is one, with diverse members, each is in need of the others. *The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need for you’, nor again the head to the feet”* (1 Corinthians 13: 21); and If there are members that are considered ‘main’, yet the rest have there importance as well. Wisdom is in the head; and work is done by the hands; for: *“The wise man’s eyes are in his head”* (Ecclesiastes 2:14)…….. The true prudent is he who has the thought of Christ, and whose insight rises up high; hence the eyes of the prudent are in his head, and those of the ignorant are in the palm of his hand.

(St. Ambrose)

==========

.

CHAPTER 11

THE SPIRITUAL WORSHIP

The Lord, being the Spiritual Heavenly Friend, we would not be able to receive Him in us, some way or another, except by the true spiritual worship.

1- The Lord’s prayer	1 - 4
2- Praying with persistence	5 - 13
3- The unity of the Spirit (accusing the Lord of casting out demons by Beelzebub)	14 - 26
4- Friendship and the Word of God	27 - 28
5- Friendship and the sign of Jonah the prophet	29 -32
6- The good eye	33 - 36
7- The inner purification and the worship by the Spirit	37 – 54

1- THE LORD’S PRAYER:

Speaking to us about the entrance of the Lord Christ into the house of Martha and Mary, and how each of them expressed her love in some way or another: Martha by serving Him, and Mary by sitting at His feet to listen to His words (10: 39); Our heart is kindled in us to join Mary at the Lord’s feet, to encounter Him and to pray ……Hence the talk came concentrated on “prayers”. The Evangelist says:

“***Now it came to pass, as He was praying in a certain place, when He ceased, that one of His disciples said to Him, ‘Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples”*** (1)

The disciples undoubtedly knew many prayers of the Old Testament, or through the Jewish tradition; but the request of the disciple: "*Lord, teach us to pray",* reveals what the disciples saw in the Lord Christ when He prayed …They perceived a new portrait they have never tested before in their worship;….. they longed to have the same thought and the same Spirit.

Again we say, if we wish the Lord would enter into our house, to serve Him like Martha, or to contemplate in His words like Mary, there is no other way, except in prayers, by which we enjoy the life and perfection of the Church on the level of ministry and contemplation.

According to St. Cyril the Great: [If the Lord has the whole abundance of goodness, Why does He pray, as long as He is perfect and needs nothing? …….. We say: It is befitting of Him, according to the ordinance of His incarnation, to practice the human work in the proper order, If He ate and drank, He also used to pray, to teach us not to be slothful in that duty, but to be rather diligent and fervent in our prayers]. ……Coming as the Head of the Church, He bears us as members of His body; and when He prays, He so does on our behalf, and to our account. By His prayer He brings us forth to the bosom of His Father; and our prayers became well received by the Father through His Son, the subject of His pleasure. In other words, By His prayer, He sanctified our prayers, and opened before us the doors to encounter God the Father in Him.

As the hearts of the disciples were kindled by the love to pray, on account of what they saw in the praying Lord; He started to talk to them about the Lord's prayer, which I have already discussed together with testimonies of the fathers, of which I shall quote some others:

"So He said to them: When you pray, say: 'Our Father in heaven …." (2)

We cannot pray as we should, unless we perceive where we stand before Him. He chose us as children of God, to talk to Him through our actual sonhood, which we gained as a free gift in the water of baptism, despite our feeling of unworthiness to be His bondservants.

+ How great is God's love for men! …… He granted even those who have gone astray from Him, and have fallen in the pit of transgressions, the forgiveness of sin, and an abundance of grace; to call Him "*Our Father in heaven"……..* Heavens which refers, as well, to those who bear the image of the heavenly world; and in whom God dwells.

(St. Cyril of Jerusalem)

+ Once you pray, forget all about the seen and unseen creation, and start by praising God the Creator of all; hence it is written: "*When you pray, say: 'Our Father in heaven'"*

(St. Basil the Great)

+ Think about how much you should do to be qualified to dare say: "*Our Father".* If you utter such a prayer, while your eyes are concentrated on the earthly things, seek glory from men, and enslaved to your evil desires; I am sure God will answer you, saying: [As long as you bear the corrupt life, call corruption your father. …….By your defiled lips you are defiling the holy name which should not be defiled. …… I command you to call Me "Father", so do not utter lies].

(St. Gregory of Nyssa)

+ Prayer starts by testifying to God (as our Father); as though a reward for the faith of those who, because they received Him He gave them the authority of becoming the children of God (John 1: 12). Anyway, the Lord Jesus often proclaimed to us about God (the Father) as our Father; and commanded us: "*Do not call anyone on earth your father, for One is your Father who is in heaven"* (Matthew 23: 9). By this prayer we obey His commandment.

  Blessed are they who recognize their Father…… Seeking testimony from heaven and earth, He rebuked Israel, saying: "*I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against Me"* (Isaiah 1: 2).

  When we mention the Father, we also call the Son, who says "*I and My Father are One"* (John 10: 30); and we do not disregard the Church, our mother; for the mother is recognized through the Father and the Son; and through her the names of the Father and the Son are revealed.

  With one general expression, or by one word, we honor the Father together with His Son; remember the commandment, and set a sign to those who have forgotten their Father.

(The scholar Tertullian)

+ [When we pray to our Father, it is befitting of us to be preoccupied with no one else; neither with an earthly creation, nor with evil spirits, nor even with angels].

  A saint who was living a life of seclusion in the wilderness was attacked by demons who surrounded him for as long as two weeks, throwing him up and down; but in vain, they could distract him from his fervent prayer.

  Two angels came to another saint who loved the Lord, and dedicated his life to prayers; and accompanied him while walking in the wilderness. Yet he never felt their presence, lest he would lose what is more important; putting in his mind the counsel of the apostle Paul, saying: "*Neither angels nor principalities, nor powers, nor anything present nor things to come,……. Shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord"* (Romans 8: 38).

  By true prayer, a monk becomes another angel, longing to see the face of God the Father in heaven, with a fervent zeal.

+ Whoever loves God lives together with Him, and prays perpetually to Him as his Father, casting away from himself any unbecoming thought.

(Father Oghris)

"Hallowed be Your name" (2)

According to the scholar Origen: [As the pagans blaspheme the name "God", by referring it to idols. …….It is as though, prayer here, is a cry out by the Church to God to uproot the pagan worship from the world, to make His name hallowed by all mankind.}. And according to St. Cyril the Great: [On those who despise the name of God among those who still do not believe in Him; once the ray of truth shines on them, they will confess the Holy One of the saints].

Anyway, if the name of the Lord Christ glorifies the Father, as we, truly acquire His name in us, the name of the Father will be sanctified in our life, and will be glorified in us. …… Of the saying of the fathers in this concern are:

+ As whoever looks up at the beauty of heaven will say: "Glory be to You, O God"; So it will be by seeing the works of a virtuous man; by seeing his virtue, he would glorify God more than heaven.

(St. John Chrysostom)

+ The name of God is holy by nature, whether we say so or not. But as it is blasphemed by the sinners, according to what is written: "*The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you"* (Romans 2: 24; Isaiah 52: 5), We seek to have the name of God hallowed in us, not as though it was not hallowed before in us, we who try to sanctify ourselves, by practicing the befitting works.

(St. Cyril of Jerusalem)

According to the scholar Tertullian, the work of the angels is to praise God, by uttering the three holies: "Holy, Holy, Holy" (Isaiah 6: 3; Revelation 4: 8). When we hallow His name, we, as well, are lifted up to heaven to practice the fellowship of the glory to come; to partake of the praises of the heavenly creatures.

If the Lord Jesus Christ glorifies the name of the Father (John 17: 6), While we abide in Him, and practice His life, the Father will be glorified by His Son dwelling in us.

"Your kingdom come"

+ It is befitting of the pure soul to say with confidence: "*Your Kingdom come"*; for whoever hears the apostle Paul say: "*Therefore, do not let sin reign in your mortal body"* (Romans 6: 12), will strive to purify his soul, by works, thoughts, and words; to be worthy of saying: "*Your Kingdom come"*

(St. Cyril of Jerusalem)

+ We also ask the Lord to save us from corruption, to take death away; or according to what is said: "*Your Kingdom come";* namely, Let the Holy Spirit dwell on us and purify us.

(St. Gregory of Nyssa)

+ Those who so utter, seem to wish that the Savior of the world would come again to illuminate the world.

(St. Cyril the Great)

+ We wish our Savior would hasten to come, that our bondage (in this world) would not extend any further.

(The scholar Tertullian)

If the martyrs wish that the Lord would hasten to come to put an end to evil, saying: "*How long, O Lord, holy and true, until you judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?"* (Revelation 6: 10); the believers, having seen the door of heaven opened before them, and having perceived their share in the eternal inheritance, also hasten the Lord's ultimate coming, to gain that eternal glory

"Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (2)

+ The blessed angels of the Lord do according to the will of God as David says: "*Bless the Lord, you His angels, who excel in strength, who do His word"* (Psalm 103: 20).. When you fervently pray, it is as though you say to the Lord; [The way your will is done in Your angels, let it be done, as well, in us on earth, O Lord].

(St. Cyril of Jerusalem)

+ Make us, O Lord, able to walk according to the heavenly life; Let us wish what You, Yourself, wish us to do.

(St. John Chrysostom)

+ Having said that life of man after resurrection will be like that of angels, we are committed, therefore, to live our life on earth with reverence, so that while still on the flesh, we do not walk according to the flesh. ……. Here the Divine Physician of souls diagnose the nature of the illness, that the ill are fleeing from the divine will; That is why they will be healed, once they are bound again to the divine will. The wellbeing of the soul is to fulfill the befitting will of God.

(St. Gregory of Nyssa)

+ We pray that His will be done in all.

  Symbolically, it could be interpreted as: [In the spirit, as it is in the body]; on account of that we are heaven and earth.

(The scholar Tertullian)

"Give us day by day our daily bread" (3)

The Lord counsels us to seek even the personal things pertaining to the satisfaction of the body, on account of that He is our Father who cares for our souls, as well as for our bodies ……. But He counsels us not to seek what Would spoil our bodies, but just what is necessary for the body to support

us to fulfill our mission.

According to St. Cyril the Great: [Some, thinking that it is unbefitting of the saints to seek from God the physical needs, give these words spiritual concepts. But, even though it is befitting of the saints to give their main interest to the spirituals; yet, they, according to the Lord's command, and without reservation, should seek from God their general bread. As a matter of fact, seeking their daily bread, will prove that they possess nothing, but practice the honored poverty; for no one who has bread will seek bread, but only who lacks it].

According to St. Basil, this prayer taught to us by the Lord, means our commitment to tell Him about the daily needs of our human nature.

Many fathers believe that our daily Bread is Christ Jesus our Lord, whom we enjoy as a daily heavenly bread, without whom, the soul will be in need. According to the scholar Tertullian: [Christ is our Bread; for He is Life, and bread is life. The Lord says: "*I am the bread of life"* (John 6: 35), and before that He said: "*For the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven, and gives life to the world"* (John 6: 33).His body, as well, is counted as bread].

According to St. Augustine:[This daily bread is the enjoyment of the resurrection of the Lord Christ; to experience its power on a daily basis in us].

"And forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who is indebted to us" (4)

+ The wrong doings against us, being little and of no significance, it would be easy for us to forgive them; whereas our wrong doings against God are big, and we have no way other than His love for men……. Beware then, not to make it difficult for God – on account of the little things that happened against you – to forgive you the big things you yourself have committed.

(St. Cyril of Jerusalem)

+ The request for forgiveness implies a confession; for by seeking forgiveness we confess our crime.

(The scholar Tertullian)

+ Even the righteous Joseph, when he sent his brothers away to bring their father to him, said to them: "*See that you do not become troubled along the way"* (Genesis 45: 24 – the Septuagint version); confirming that it is befitting of us, while on the way of prayer, not to go to the Father while angry.

+ What a waste, to spend one day without prayer, because you refuse to reconcile with your neighbor; By Keeping your anger, you lose your prayer.

+ Every work of revenge you do against your neighbor, will be a rock of offense when your pray.

(Father Oghris)

+ Grudge blinds the mind of the one who prays, and covers his prayer by a cloud of darkness.

He who truly loves prayer, and gives himself up to anger or grudge, is like someone, intending to have sharp sight, plucks his eyes off.

(Father Oghris)

"And do not lead us into temptation" (4)

+ This probably means: Do not let temptations cover us up, and sweep us away, thinking of temptation as a violent torrent difficult to cross.

(St. Cyril of Jerusalem)

+ Anyway, It is unbefitting of us, in our prayer, to seek tribulations to come over us, for Christ commands all mankind in general, to pray not to fall into temptation. But in case one does fall into it, he is committed to seek from God to give him the strength to endure it, so that the words saying, "*He who endures to the end will be saved"* (Matthew 10: 22), would be fulfilled.

(St. Basil)

The scholar Tertullian discerns between a temptation allowed for us by God; which is more like a "test" to justify us, and that brought on us by the enemy to tempt, namely he deceive us. When we pray to God not to lead us into temptation, we mean then, to ask Him to support us against the tricks and

deception of the devil.

"But deliver us from the evil one" (4)

If the phrase "*Do not lead us into temptation"* means that we would never be tempted, God would not add: "*But deliver us from the evil one"……..* The evil one is the devil, from whom we seek protection.

(St. Cyril of Jerusalem)

Finally, the scholar Tertullian confirms that the Lord's prayer is the foundation set by the Lord Christ for our prayers; that opens for us the door of prayer, for everyone of us to seek what suits him; yet through the same line of thought of this prayer. Despite its small size, yet it includes plenty, which are:

[Giving glory to God, by saying: "*Our Father"*;

A testimony of faith, by saying "*Hallowed be Your name"*;

Presenting obedience, by saying: "*Your will be done"*;

Having hope, by saying: "*Give us day by day our daily bread"*;

A complete recognition of our sins, to gain forgiveness.

Because of strong terror, we seek protection from temptation.

How amazing! ……..God Himself teaches us what He wants us to pray for]

2- PRAYING WITH PERSISTANCE:

If the Lord Christ presented to us a living model of prayer, seeking from us the worship kindled with the Spirit, He asks us to pray with persistence, not that He responds to an abundance of words, but to kindle our depths toward unceasing prayers. …. Even though God longs to give, and knows for sure our needs and inner longings, yet He seeks from us persistence, to learn how to stand before Him, and to enter with Him into a true friendship.

According to Father Isaac: [In His longing to grant us the heavenlies and the eternities, God exhorts us to press on Him by our persistence. He does not disregard nor despise persistence, but He actually commends it].

And according to St. Augustine: [Our Lord Jesus Christ would not exhort us so strongly to seek, if He has no intention to give. ……..His enthusiasm puts our slothfulness to shame; ……He intends to give us more than our desire to take; ……..He intends to show us mercy, more than our desire to get away from misery …… His exhortation to us is for our sake].

And according to Father Oghris: [In case you have not still got the talent of prayer or praise, be persistent to get it].

And according to St. Cyril the Great: [In His response to a request from His disciples, the Savior taught us how we should pray. But, some of us, receiving this teaching, probably practice prayer the way it is given by the Lord, but with slothfulness and lukewarmness ; and if it happens that we get no response the first and the second time, we forsake prayer altogether. For that is probably how we are, the Lord gave us the following parable to proclaim to us that perseverance on prayer is very beneficial to us].

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

In this parable, it is to be noticed:

a- If the goal of giving this parable is to exhorts us to be persistent in our prayers to get a response to our supplication; we notice that the Lord Christ, offering Himself as a Friend of humanity, says: "*Which of you shall have a friend and go to him at midnight",* According to Father Theophlactius: [God is this Friend who loves all humanity, and wishes for all to be saved]. And according to St. Ambrose: [Who could be a greater Friend for us than Him who gave His body for our sake? …….. From whom David asked for bread and got them; saying: "*At midnight, I will rise and give thanks to You, because of Your righteous judgments"* (Psalm 119: 62); ……..whom he has no fear to wake up in the middle of the night, for he knows for sure that He perpetually works and watches……We as well, should remember what came in the books, and care to pray day and night, and supplicate for the forgiveness of our sins. For if a saint like David, on whose shoulders were the responsibilities of a kingdom, used to praise God

seven times a day (Psalm 119: 164), persisted on offering sacrifices day and night; how much more would we rather seek for the sake of our many falls, because of the weakness of our bodies and souls, so as not to lack for our edification, a morsel of bread that supports the heart of man (Psalm 103: 15); having been worn out by the long way, and labored a lot on the cross roads of this life].

The Lord Christ seeks from us to resort to Him as a true Divine Friend, all the time, even in the middle of the night; to supplicate to Him to sustain us by the heavenly bread, to satisfy our soul and body.

b- If God presents Himself a Friend of us, from whom to ask, in the middle of the night, to grant us heavenly bread for the sake of others who came to us, as well, hungry in the middle of the night; the Lord also counts them as our friends in humanity. According to St. Augustine; that friend who comes from the street, namely from the world, as though, from his evil way, longing to enjoy the Truth; we cannot give him hospitality and satisfy him, unless we ask the Lord first to make us worthy of enjoying the three loaves of bread, namely the Trinitarian faith.

c- The person who came to his friend in the middle of the night, asking for the sake of a friend who came to visit him; was it not enough for him to ask for one loaf of bread, or two? …….Why then did he ask for three loaves?

--As we encounter our Groom the Savior amid this world with its evil temptations, as though in the middle of the night; we ask for ourselves, as well as for others, three loaves of bread, to satisfy our spirits, souls, and bodies. For God alone can satisfy man with his whole being. According to Father Theophlactius, bishop of Bulgaria: [We seek three loaves of bread from God, namely, for the satisfaction of our spirit, soul, and body, so as not to be harmed in our temptations].

Here, we perceive the Evangelic concept of the holy life or of the chastity; For the chaste man, namely the holy man in the Lord, does not live in deprivation, but receives from the hands of the Lord what satisfy his whole life, bring joy to his soul, exultation to his spirit, and comfort to his body, even if he suffers much for the sake of the Lord. That is why the newly baptized Catechumen in the early Church, used to sing directly after their baptism, the following psalm: “*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 ….”* (Psalm 23: 1 – 3).

--According to St. Augustine: These three loaves of bread is our Trinitarian faith; on account of that our spirits, souls, and bodies, will not be satisfied internally except by the Holy Trinity -- the Trinity of love, that fills us and flows on us with beatitude; saying: [In the middle of labor, man is committed to seek from God the understanding of the Trinity, to have comfort in his present life; ……..

Let us try to understand the three loaves of bread in the Trinity who are one essence. When you get the three loaves of bread, namely the food of knowledge of the Trinity, you will have the source of life and food. Do not ever have fear, and do not stop supplicating, for this food is limitless, and puts an end to your need].

In another place he says: {Those three loaves of bread are nothing but the food of the heavenly secret].

And in some detail, he also says: [Now you should no more fear the sudden coming of a guest in the middle of the night; for by giving hospitality inside your house, you can make him one of the household; do not fear because the bread will never be lacking; namely, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit …… Therefore, learn and teach; live and feed the others…… It is God who gives you; gives you nothing better than Himself; ……. What more would you need?].

--According to St. Augustine: [These three loaves of bread are the exalted divine gifts to humanity; namely: faith, hope, and love; Faith, you receive from God, being written: "*God has dealt to each one a measure of faith"* (Romans 12: 3);…… hope, you also receive from Him, being said: "*which You have caused me to hope"* (119: 49); so is love; being said: "*Because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us"* (Romans 5: 5)]..

d- ***"And he will answer from within and say: 'Do not trouble me, the door is shut and my children are with me in bed; I cannot rise and give to you"*** (7)

It was befitting of the man inside to open his door, and not to tell him who knocks that he is is disturbing him while his door is shut, his children are with him in bed, and he could not rise to give him; …… Nevertheless, by persistence, the one who knocks could force his friend to give him his need, How much more would God give to those who seek from Him with persistence, a sign of the truth of their request?..... God is not like

the man who answers from inside; but the Word of God has come out to us through incarnation, to dwell in our midst, to speak to us mouth to mouth, and took away the veil separating heaven from earth. ……..The door is no longer shut, but is open before all; "*God desires that all will be saved, and come to the knowledge of the truth"* (1 Timothy 2: 4). ……His children are not with Him in bed; for neither He nor His angels and saints fall asleep, but watch the night working by their prayers and supplications for the sake of the lost and the needy souls. ……The Lord will never say: "*I cannot rise and give you*"; for He is risen from the dead, and gave us His resurrected life working in us.

With such a painful portrait, the Lord presented the human friend, from whom we still can get our requests through persistence, despite the opposing circumstances….. How much more would we get from the Lord Himself?

According to St. Augustine: [If the man who is already in bed, after being disturbed in his sleep, was committed to rise up and give his friend what he needs, how much more would He give with compassion, He who never sleep, but even wakes us up from our own sleep to rise up and seek from Him to give us?]

Saying "*the door is now shut"* probably refers to our understanding, shut against perceiving Him. God does not want to see the door shut and keep our depths from encountering Him; But it is us who shut it through our disobedience and our ignorance of His salvation works. According to St. Augustine: [The time referred to here is that of the famine for the Word of God, when human understanding is shut; and those who are committed to distribute the wisdom of the gospel as bread, through preaching all over the world now, are having repose with the Lord].

If the world has closed the door by its disobedience, it is the work of the church to seek from the Lord to open that door before those who preach His word, to bring the souls forth to where the comfort and satisfaction are in the Lord.

According to St. Ambrose: [Cast from yourselves the sleep of slothfulness, to knock on the door of Christ, which the apostle Paul sought to be opened before him to preach about the secret of Christ (Colossians 4: 3); and probably is the door seen open by St. John who says: "*After these things I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven, and the first voice which I heard was like a trumpet speaking with me. Saying, 'Come up here, and I will show you things which must take place after this"* (Revelation 4: 1). This door was opened before John and Paul, to let them have, for our sake, loaves of bread for our food; because they persisted on knocking on the door in both convenient and inconvenient times (2 Timothy 4: 2), to restore life to the Gentiles, labored and exhausted on the way of the world, by an abundance of heavenly food.

e- ***"I say to you, though he will not rise and give him because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will rise and give him as many as he needs. So I say to you, ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you"*** (8, 9).

According to St. Augustine: [What does He mean by saying: "*because of his persistence"? …….* Because he did not stop knocking, nor quit when he was rejected ……...God may sometime delay in giving us certain things; in order to let us recognize the value of those good things, and not because He refuses to give them to us. The things that we greatly long for, we get with a great joy, contrary to those we easily get, which would seem cheap in our eyes……. Let us then ask, seek, and knock; for through all that, we ourselves will grow, and get more]. And he says: [By the prayers we practice for the things we seek, we get what God is ready to grant us ……His gifts are enormously great, but we are little and narrow in our possibilities to accommodate them].

And according to St. Basil:[God probably chooses to delay responding to your request, to increase your zeal to come to Him; to make you recognize the great value of God's gift, and to be anxious to keep it, once you get it. Because what man gets through great labor, he will strive to keep, lest, by losing it, he would come to lose all his labor].

Why does He say: [Ask …… Seek ……Knock?]

1- Probably to confirm, that He desires to give us. As according to St. Augustine: [He would not so encourages us to ask Him, if He does not intend to give us; and to take away from us our slothfulness; for He desires to give us more than what we ask for].

And according to St. Basil: [It is befitting of us to ask for the divine help, yet not without enthusiasm, nor with mind distracted here and there; for such a man, will not only have his request denied, but may rather provoke God to anger. ……. Whoever stands before a ruler, will hold his eyes fast on him, lest he would be punished; How much more will he be, whoever stands before God with fear and awe?..... In case you are disturbed by a certain sin that hinders your steadfast standing before God with your full strength; Reconsider yourself, so that, when you stand before God, you would concentrate your mind on Him; and God will certainly forgive you, on account of that your past distraction was, not out of slothfulness, but out of weakness. ……In case you so commit yourself, you will not leave Him until you get what you ask for. And if not, it would be because your request is unbefitting; slothfully raised without faith; was not for your own good; or because you have forsaken prayers altogether. ……People often say: Why should we pray, when God, beforehand, knows what we need without asking Him?..... Yes He surely knows, and is ready to give us the temporal things in abundance; Yet we have first to ask for the good things, and the kingdom of heaven; Then we would get our request…… Let us then ask with faith and perseverance, for what is good for us; and let us not hinder our prayer by the disobedience of our conscience].

2- The repetition three times: “Ask, Seek, and knock”, means to ask Him, not only with our mind and inner intentions, but also with our lips, and with our works. It is befitting of us to let our prayers set forth through the harmony of the mind with the words and behavior; so that, sweet fragrance would come out from holy depths, blessed words, and works, that bring pleasure to God.

By similar line of thought, according to St. Svereus of Antioch: [By the word “knock” He probably means ask in an active way; for man knocks with his hand, which is the sign of the good work. The discernment between the three kinds may also be done in the following way: At the beginning of virtue, the first step is to seek the knowledge of truth; the second step is to seek how to go along that way, and the third step would be when man reaches virtue, he knocks on the door to enter into the wide field of knowledge. These three things man seek with prayer. “Ask” probably means (pray); “seek” means (pray by good works which we do in a way analogous with our prayers); and :knock” means (Persist on praying).

In other way, asking, seeking, and knocking, mean the unity of prayer with the practical life in the Lord: We ask Him to start together with us; to go with us all along the way; and to crown our strife with the eternal glory. For He is the beginning and the end; and He is the Companion along the way; namely, By Him we begin, continue, and consummate.

To encourage us to keep on asking, seeking, and knocking, the Lord Christ revealed our right as children to ask from our Father, and to take; saying:

“If a son asks for bread from any father among you, will he give him a stone: Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent instead of a fish? Or if he asks for an egg, will he offer him a scorpion? …. If you then, being evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more would your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?” (11 – 13).

In this talk we notice the following:

The way He sought from us to ask, seek, and to knock, namely three times; the Lord gives us the bread, the fish, and the egg as three examples of food; it is as though, when we ask the Lord, He would satisfy us spiritually, mentally, and physically.

According to St. Augustine: [“Bread” is (love); “fish” is (faith); and “egg” is (hope); namely, we seek from our heavenly Father to make us love, believe, and hope……. By the “bread” He means (love), as the greatest of our need, without which everything is counted as nothing, like a table with no bread. Contrary to love is the hardness of heart, compared to stone…… The “Fish” symbolizes (faith) in unseen things, which we have

got in the water of baptism, without seeing it by our own eyes. On another aspect, faith, like fish, is attacked by the waves of this world, and would never perish; Contrary to the fish is the serpent with its deadly poison; for by its evil suction it cast its seed in the first man ……While in the "egg" the new bird is still not yet developed, we hope it will happen. Contrary to the egg is the scorpion, before its deadly sting, man would flee back with fear; contrary to "hope" that sets us forward beyond the things before us].

In other words "bread" refers to (love), contrary to the stone that refers to the hardness of heart. "fish" refers to (faith), contrary to the serpent that refers to denying faith; as when the serpent deceived Eve by its craftiness, and corrupted her mind from simplicity (2 Corinthians 11: 2, 3).. And the "egg" refers to (hope); when from what seems to be a hard object, a living bird will come forth; contrary to the scorpion that destroys man's life.

While the Lord, our Divine Friend intends to fill our life with love, faith, and hope, to fill our depths, to need nothing more; the devil, on the other hand, our adversary intends to provide a stone instead of bread; like when he said to Jesus: "Say to the stone to become bread"; for he is used to provide the hardness of heart instead of the bread of life; ……He was the one who sent the serpent to Eve; ……..and whose works are likened to the deadly venom of a scorpion.

Let us then seek God Himself to fill our life, and to provide us from what is His own. According to St. Augustine: [You, greedy man, what do you seek? What would give you satisfaction, if God Himself does not?]. and says: [Give your soul her food, lest it would perish for famine; …….. If you may ask: 'What kind of food?', if you intend to hear, understand, and believe, the Lord, Himself, said to you: "*I am the living bread which came down from heaven"* (John 6: 41)].

Commenting on seeking bread from God the Father, St. Cyril the Great said:,[If your son asks you for bread, you will readily give it to him, because he asks for a good thing; but if, through ignorance, he asks you to give him a stone to eat, you will certainly deny his request for such a harmful thing]. …….

And according to the scholar Origen, the fish we seek refers to the love of knowledge].

Commenting on the egg, being a symbol of hope, St. Augustine says: [Let us put our eggs underneath the wings of the gospel, which, crying out for the sake of the vain and desolate city, says : "*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem …… how often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing"* (Matthew 23: 37)]. And he says: [The way a hen would tear apart a scorpion attacking her chicks, the hen of the gospel will do to the heretics, who crawl out of their holes to poison her children with their harmful heresies]

Finally, to confirm His heart desires toward us, the Lord says: "*How much more would the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who seek Him?"…….* If our earthly fathers care to give bread, fish, and egg, to help us live on earth; The Father in heaven gives the Holy Spirit, who

alone, is the Spirit of fellowship, who stead us fast in the only begotten Son, to bring us forth into the bosom of the heavenly Father…… His work is to grant us “the new lfe” that bears the heavenly feature, to go back anew to the fatherly bosom.

According to St. Clement of Alexandria: [If we, while evil, know how to give good gifts, how much more the Good Father of mercies, the Father of every comfort, would have compassion, mercy, and longsuffering on those who return to Him? …… Going back to Him is nothing but to cease committing sins, and looking backward again].

3-THE UNITY OF THE SPIRIT: (Accusing the Lord of casting the demons out by Beelzebub):

If our friendship with God is set upon persistent prayer; this prayer has to be supported by the unity of the Spirit. For in His friendship with us, God intends for us to walk together by the One Spirit, by the work of His Holy Spirit, the Grantor of fellowship and unity. That is why the Evangelist Luke narrates to us the episode ot healing the man possessed by a mute demon, which, by casting it out, the Lord was accused of doing it through Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons. Yet in such an accusation, the lord found a chance to confirm the need for the unity of the Spirit with no division; by the work of His Holy Spirit, the Grantor of fellowship. ……. As we have already dealt in some details with this issue in our interpretation of the gospel according to Matthew (12: 22-37), and of Mark (3: 22-30); I shall only mention the following points:

1- As the miracle of casting out the mute devil stirred up the astonishment and admiration of the multitudes, it stirred up as well the envy and grudge of some, most probably Pharisees. Not able to deny it, they accused the Lord that by Beelzebub, ruler of the demons He cast out the demons.

   The word “Beelzebub” is the Aramic version of the term “Baal Zebub”, namely (god of house flies), the god of Acron (2 kings 1: 3); where the inhabitants believed it could drive the flies out of houses.

   Some of them sought from Him a sign from heaven to confirm that what He does is by a heavenly power, and not through the devil; and expected that the Lord will respond to their request by sending fire from heaven the way the prophet Elijah did; not perceiving that, in their midst, was the Heavenly One who condescended to dwell among them as one of them.

2- He did not respond to their request, the way He previously rebuked His disciples John and James when they asked to allow them to seek fire from heaven to consume a Samaritan village that refused to receive Him (Luke 9: 54-56); but, with longsuffering He strived to bring them back to the

truth; not denying His love even to His oppressors; and ready to give His life a random for all. About this, St. John Chrysostom says: [He endured all those things to exhort us to follow His lead, and to endure the like foolishness].

3- The answer of the Lord Christ, as usual, came not to defend Himself as much as for the edification of their souls and to reform their life. His answer came bearing two aspects:

a- The negative aspect, namely, as the devil would never divide against himself lest his kingdom would be brought to desolation, He also asks us not to divide against ourselves, whether on the level of the kingdom as a whole, or on that of the families; saying:

"***Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation, and a house divided against a house falls. If Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? Because you say that I cast out demons by Beelzebub"*** (17, 18)

b- The positive aspect: In which He proclaims the activity of the Holy Spirit, who is One with Him in Godhead; For He works by the His Holy Spirit and His power, and calls Him "**the finger of God"..** In this the Lord calls us, not only to refrain from by the spirit of division against ourselves, on the level of the families or the churches, but to receive the Spirit of God, the Spirit of fellowship, working in us with power, for the edification of the kingdom of God; saying:

"And if I cast out demons by Beelzebub, with whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore, they will be your judges. But if I cast out demons with the finger of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you" (19, 20).

It is therefore, not enough to reject the spirit of division, lest we perish; but it is befitting of us to recfeive His Spirit work in us, to have the kingdom of God come strongly upon us.

the hand and the arm of God

4- The Lord Christ calls the Holy Christ "the "**finger of God",** probably because a man of authority, when he points his finger, everything he wants will be done. It is as though the Father and the Son work by their Holy Spirit, like by a finger.

According to St. Cyril the Great: [The way the Holy Spirit is said to be "**The finger of God";** The Son, as well, is said to be **the arm or the hand of Go**d (Psalm 98: 1); by whom the Father does everything. And as the finger is not separated from the hand, but is naturally a part of it; so is the Holy Spirit essentially united to the Son; and through the Holy Spirit, the Son does everything].

The fingers, with the differences in their locations, sizes, and lengths, working together without division, refer to the diversity of services, talents, and the One spirit among men, according to the saying of the apostle Paul: "*There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit; there are differences of ministries, but the same Lord; and there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all (1 Corinthians* 12: 4-7)

According to St. Augustine: [The Holy Spirit is called "the finger of God" because of the diversities of gifts; for in Him each one gets his own gift, whether men or angels; for in our members, there is no division as convenient as in our fingers]. And according to St. Ambrose: [the term 'finger' refers to unity, and not to difference in authority].

5- Who are their sons who cast the demons out, and who will be their judges, but the congregation of simple and illiterate disciples, who belonged to the Jewish nation, and were still living among the Jews with their simple hearts, who, by casting demons by power and authority, they condemn every accusation that the scribes and the Pharisees might direct against the authority of the Lord Christ.

According to St. Cyril the Great: [The blessed disciples were Jews, and children of Jews according to the flesh, have got authority from the Lord Christ to cast out the demons the way the apostle Paul once did when he commanded the evil spirit, saying the words: "*I command **you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her**"*(Acts 16: 18)…… If your children – as He says – by My name trample with their feet upon Beelzebub, by rebuking his followers (the demons), and casting them out from those possessed; is it not, therefore, an obvious blasphemy and great ignorance to accuse Me that I carry the authority of Beelzebub?! ……. Now you are accused through the faith of your children]

Now, the Lord Christ moves from showing that He casts out the demons by His Holy Spirit (the finger of God), to the authority He gave to His disciples, the children of the Jews, to draw their attention and minds away from the foolish debates the scribes and the Pharisees used to stir through their envy and grudge, to look at the new authority granted to the disciples through Him; and to the possibility that came to be for humanity through the Lord Christ. As what the Lord Christ does, was not a show off of His divine power, as much as it is a deposit He presents to the account of His kingdom in our hearts; namely to the account of His church in us; hence He says: *"The Kingdom of God came upon you"* (20)……. In other words, He intended to say to them: [Instead of accusing Me that I work by the power of Beelzebub, enjoy my authority I grant to men to destroy Beelzebub, and to cast out his evil spirits from souls and bodies.

According to St. Cyril the Great: [If, by becoming a Man, I came to be one of you, and cast the demons out by the “finger of God”; the human nature has got, in Me first, the kingdom of God, having become glorified by breaking down the authority of Satan, and rebuking the unclean spirits. This is the meaning of the words: “*The kingdom of God has come upon you”.* But the Jews did not understand the ordainment of the only begotten Son in the flesh; and that they ought rather to meditate in how the only begotten Son, the Word of God, has become a body without any change from what He is, glorifying the human nature, whose lowliness ,He did not hesitate to take upon Himself, to bring on it His own riches].

6- As humanity, in Jesus Christ, has got an authority by His Holy Spirit; and as the kingdom of God was strongly proclaimed in her; The kingdom of darkness that prevailed for a long time, and reigned with ferocity and violence through our weakness, has no more place; on account of that the Strong came to destroy him who wrongly thought of himself to be strong, to whom we gave the chance to reign on us for a long time; the Lord says:

When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are in peace.; but when a stronger than he comes upon him and overcomes him, he takes from him all his armor in which he trusted, and divides his spoils” (21, 22).

So He presents to us the Messianic work in our life, in the following way: “T**he strong man**”, for a long time reigned upon our heart as his own house, fully armed with craftiness and wickedness. But when **“the stronger Messiah**” came, armed with love and giving; by the truth He destroyed vanity; by love, He destroyed wickedness; and by light He destroyed the darkness; and drove away him who occupied and reigned upon the world, taking his spoils away from him. So the Lord shows that there is no truce between Light and darkness; nor an accord between Christ and Belial.

According to St. John Chrysostom: [The devil was called ‘**the strong’**, not because he is so by nature, but with reference to the old authority that was his because of our weakness].

And according to St. Cyril the Great: [This is the ultimate destiny of our general enemy, the crafty Satan, the multi-headed creator of evil; for, before the coming of the Savior, he, with great power, and as a vicious and arrogant robber, used to lead the herds that were not his, but belonged to God, to, and lock them in his own fold. But once the Word of God, who is above all, the Grantor of every power, the Lord of hosts, having become a Man, came and prevailed upon him, took his possessions, and divided his spoils; and those who were captivated by him in sin and denial, were called by the saintly apostles to the knowledge of truth, and to approach God the Father through faith in the Son].

7- Then the Lord presented the following principle:

“He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with me, scatters” (23)

Here, the Lord Christ, to show the danger of the negative attitude, through which man chooses to stand in the middle of the road. presents two ways with no third: the Light and the darkness; the kingdom of God and that of the devil. Whoever work by the spirit of Beelzebub would not cast demons away to the account of the kingdom of God; but bows down before that of the darkness ……..They are called by God to reconsider themselves, to recognize in truth where they stand: Are they with, or against Him; gathering to His account, or scattering the souls?

He is, as though, telling them: [I came to gather the children of God in Me; those who were scattered by the enemy who works against Me. Do you, therefore, gather with Me, or scatter with him?! ……

According to St. Cyril the Great: [He says: I came to save every man from the hand of the devil, to rescue them from his wickedness, by which he managed to catch them, to liberate the captives, to shine light on those in the darkness, to raise up the fallen, to heal the brokenhearted, and to gather the scattered children of God; while, the devil, on the contrary, working against Me, dares to scatter those I gather and save…… How then, is it possible for him who opposes Me, and hinders My goals, to give Me an authority against himself?! …….. Is it not foolishness to imagine such an assumption?!].

Commenting on the words of the Lord, St. John Chrysostom says on His tongue: [If whoever does not work with Me is counted as My adversary, how would be him who opposes Me?! ……... It so seems that, by this parable, the Lord referred to the Jews who were stirred up against Him by the devil; to scatter whom He gathered].

8- After presenting the proverb of "**the stronger"** who drives "**the strong"** out and divides his spoils; to give us hope in hiding in Him, to fight against the devil, and to drive him out of our depths; He presented to us the following parable to warn us:

"When an unclean spirit goes out of a man, he goes through dry places seeking rest, and finding none, he says, 'I will return to my house from which I came. And when he comes, he finds it swept and put in order. Then he goes and takes with him seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter and dwell there; and the last state of that man is worse than the first" (24 – 26).

By these two parables, the Lord Christ shows the difference between the work done by Him, and that done by the Pharisees. In the first parable, He showed Himself as "**the stronger**" who liberates us from him who prevailed upon us and captivated us by his wickedness. While in the second parable He showed the work of the Pharisees and the Jewish rulers; saying: "*Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel land and sea to win one proselyte; and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves"* (Matthew 23: 15).

By this parable, He warns us lest we start the way, and fail to consummate it. For, starting the way, we drive out the demon away from our hearts, as though from his house; but finding no place to rest, he would keep on searching, to find in our slothfulness the chance to return in a worse and stronger way to dwell in us, to find our hearts swept and put in order for him to dwell anew. This is unfortunately the condition of many Christians who "*begin in the Spirit, then be made perfect by the flesh*" (Galatians 3: 3)

That was the condition of the Jews who went ahead of the Gentiles in having the law, the prophets, and the knowledge of God; and enjoyed driving the devil out of their hearts. Yet, having ended up denying the Lord, they became more evil than how they were before they come into faith, and worse than the Gentiles.

According to St. Ambrose: [The unclean spirit was driven out of them by the law; but finding no rest in the Gentiles, who have received the Christian faith; and whose dry hearts got watered by the dew of the Holy Spirit; who quenched the fiery darts of the wicked one (Ephesians 6: 16), the unclean spirit returned to the Jewish people together with other unclean spirits worse than himself. ……..

According to St. Cyril the Great: [When they were in bondage in Egypt, living according to the habits and laws of the Egyptians, full of defilements, they had the unclean spirit dwell in their wicked hearts. But, having been saved by the prophet Moses through the mercy of God, and received the divine law, and called to the true knowledge of God, the unclean spirit was driven out of them. But having come, later on, to deny the Savior, the unclean spirit attacked them anew, to find their heats void, empty of the fear of God, as though swept clean for them to dwell. ……. The same way the Holy Spirit, finding a pure heart free of every defilement, comes, dwells, and find rest in it; the unclean spirit used to dwell in the hearts of the wicked, empty of every virtue and of the fear of God. By that the last state of the Jews, came to be worse than their first].

4-FRIENDSHIP AND THE WORD OF GOD:

"And it happened as He spoke these things that a certain woman from the crowd raised her voice and said to Him, 'Blessed is the womb that bore You, and the breasts which nursed You'. But He said, 'More than that, blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it'" (27, 28)

Having heard the words uttered by the Lord, the woman blessed her who bore and nursed Him ……..St. Mary, was truly worthy of blessing; Yet the Lord, while not denying her the blessing, exhorted us, as well, to gain the blessing by saying: "*blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it".*

According to St. John Chrysostom: [St. Mary was blessed more by those words, having, herself, bore Him by her soul, as well as by her body. And according to St. Augustine: [Being a mother would not bring her benefit, unless she bore Him in her heart in a blessed way, more so than in her body].

The Lord opened before us the door to encounter Him, and to enjoy His friendship. If He, at the beginning of the chapter sought from us to pray with persistence, then exhorted us to have the unity of the spirit without dissention, and to enjoy the work of the Holy Spirit in us. Now, He exhorts us to get attached to the word of God, to keep it in our hearts and to behave according to it…….. Even though we did not enjoy bearing the Lord Christ physically, and not encountering Him like those who were contemporary of Him; but we have His gospel in our hands; if we hear it and keep it, we shall see Him transfigure in it.

According to St. Augustine, that divine talk touches the life of the whole Church that experiences the life of unity as one body of the Lord; saying: [I wish no one rejoices for the sake of his temporary seed, but rather for the sake of the Spirit who connects them to God].

5-FRIENDSHIP AND THE SIGN OF JONAH THE PROPHET:

"And while the crowd was thickly gathered together, He began to say: This is an evil generation, it seeks a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah the prophet. For as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so also the Son of Man will be to this generation. The queen of the South will rise up in the judgment with the men of this generation and condemn them, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and indeed a greater than Solomon is here. The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and indeed a greater than Jonah is here" (29 -32).

To some of them who sought from Him a sign from heaven, He presented Himself as a sign; proclaiming Jonah the prophet who came out of the belly of the big fish, as a symbol of His person who set forth from the tomb, risen from the dead (Matthew 12: 40);; By his preaching, Jonah saved the Gentile nation of Nineveh; And by his wisdom, Solomon drew the Gentile queen of the South from the ends of the earth, to represent the Church of the Gentiles to come, not only to hear His wisdom but to practice it …….Now, there is indeed the Wisdom of God Himself. In the two symbols the Gentile Church obviously appeared to connect to the True Jonah, risen as though from the belly of the great fish; and to the true wise Solomon, the Grantor of peace and wisdom.

Commenting on the gospel according to Luke, St. Cyril the Great says that this verse is not some sort of show off, as the Jews thought; ……For when Moses the prophet, in the old, gave them some signs, it was to reveal their sins for the sake of repentance. When he cast his rod on the ground, and it became a serpent; then held its tail to return to its nature as a serpent; by the rod he referred to the Jews, who, being cast among the Egyptians, they came to be like a serpent, in adopting their habits, iniquities, that brought them away from God; as though they were cast down from His hand like the

rod cast down from Moses' hand. But when God took hold of them, like what Moses did when he held the serpent's tail, they returned to their first state, like when the serpent became a rod again, planted in paradise, having been called to the true knowledge of God, and enriched by the law as a way to the life of virtue.

So it was repeated when Moses put his hand in his bosom then brought it out, leprous as snow; then put it again in his bosom to take leprosy away from it. That sign was not done without a goal; but referred to Israel who were under the care and protection of God, when they were holding fast to the customs of their fathers, and walked by the spirit of virtuous life befitting of him, that of their fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; when they were as though in the bosom of God; But once they came out like the hand of Moses did; namely deserted the life of virtue and faith of their fathers, they were inflicted by leprosy, namely by uncleanness; and when they again, returned to the bosom of God, and under His divine care, the uncleanness of the Egyptians were taken away from them.

According to St. Cyril the Great, it was befitting of the Jews to perceive their fault; but instead they were preoccupied with craftily seeking a sign from heaven; saying: [The Lord did not respond to their request, according to the words of the Holy Book: "*They shall go to seek the Lord, but they will not find Him"* See Hosea 5:6)…….. He said to them, they will not be given except the sign of Jonah the prophet, that refers to the passion of the cross, and the resurrection from the dead; saying: "*For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth"* (Matthew 12: 40). And He said to them: "*Destroy this temple (namely His body), and in three days I will raise it up"* (John 2: 19)…… Destroying death, and reforming the corruption by the resurrection from the dead, was indeed a great sign of the power of the incarnate Word and His divine authority, and an evidence strong enough for the serious-minded men. But they instead, bribed the Roman guards of the tomb to say that "*Jesus' disciples came by night and took away His body"* (Matthew n28: 13). Even though His resurrection was a great sign, strong enough to convince the inhabitants of the whole earth, that Christ is God; that He chose to suffer by His body, died, and resurrected again, commanding the chains of death to depart, and the corruption to be cast away; But the Jews did not believe even in this; to be worthy to hear: "*The queen of the South will rise up in the judgment together with this generation and condemn them"* ……Eagerly seeking to hear the wisdom of Solomon, she endured the difficulty of such a long journey to inquire from him concerning the nature of the seen things like the animals and the plants. ……But you have in your midst the "Wisdom" Himself, who came to you to talk about the unseen heavenly things, confirming what He said by wonders and signs; yet you have forsaken the Word, and, carelessly, disregarded the amazing nature of His teachings].

6-THE SIMPLE EYE:

“*No one when he has lit a lamp, puts it in a secret place or under a basket, but on a lampstand, that those who come in may see the light. The lamp of the body is the eye. Therefore when your eye is good, your whole body also is full of light. But when your eye is bad, your body also is full of darkness. Therefore, take heed that the light which is in you is not darkness. If then your whole body is full of light, having no part dark, the whole body will be full of light, as when the bright shining of a lamp gives you light”* (33 – 36).

Those phrases reveal the foundation of the “divine friendship”. For if God is “Light”, it is befitting of us to become the lampstand that bears the light, and testifies to its activity…….. In our friendship with Him,, we encounter the Light, not put under a certain basket, nor according to human measures; but borne on the truth that raises us up high; not to submit to time nor place; but to live and soar up high, like the heavenly angels of God, ……. Our friendship is “A fellowship in the divine Light”, or “an exalted angelic life”.

If we ask: How could we become a lighted lamp, bear a truthful testimony on the lampstand of the heavenly life? To this the Lord will answer us, saying: “*”The lamp of the body is the eye”; ……..*as though committing us to have a simple eye, to behold the simple Lord; to have the pure insight, that carries no complication, but, in its simplicity, bears one goal, namely to behold the Lord. By that the heart, which is the eye and the insight of the soul. will see the Lord transfigured in everything”; the soul will be enlightened, the body will be sanctified; man, in his wholeness, will be holy to the Lord, and a lamp that bears the divine light.

We have already discussed this simple eye, holy by the simple Lord in our interpretation of the gospel according to Matthew (6: 22-23).

St. Ambrose, talking to us about “the lighted lamp” being our Evangelic faith, or our faith in the word of God, the light that reveals the way to us, by which we search for the lost coin, says: [The lamp is faith, according to what is written: “*Your word is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path”* (Psalm 119: 105) The Word of God is the subject of our faith, it is the light. ……But the lamp, being the faith, *“the true light that gives light to every man coming to the world”* John 1: 9), will not give light unless it gets its light from a higher source (God). The lamp we light is the strength of our spirits and emotions, by which we find the lost coin (Luke 15: 8). ……..It is not befitting, therefore, to put this faith (the lamp) under the basket of the law, for the law is limited, whereas the grace is limitless. The law presents a shadow; whereas the grace gives light. I wish no one locks his faith up within the limits of the law, but brings it on to the Church to adorn it with the grace of the Lord.……. In the old, the high priest used to light the lamps in the temple according to the Jewish rites, regularly day and night; which are now quenched on account of that they were put under the basket of the law; the earthly Jerusalem that killed the prophets disappeared (Matthew 23: 37); while the heavenly Jerusalem received our faith and put it on the highest summits of mountains, namely on Christ. Hence I say that the Church will never be hidden by the darkness nor by the shadows of this world, but will always radiates by the eternal Sun of Righteousness, and shine on us with the rays of the grace of the Spirit].

7-THE INNER PURIFICATION AND THE WORSHIP BY THE SPIRIT:

After he presented to us the secret of our friendship with the heavenly God, namely the worship by the Spirit and the truth, through persistent prayers; the unity of the Spirit without division, being attached to the Word of God, and practically keeping it; repentance together with faith in the true “Jonah”; and having the enlightened inner eyes; the Evangelist Luke ends his talk by proclaiming the need for “the inner purification”, so that our worship would be by the Spirit and the Truth, and would not be based upon outer formalities with no depths.

This talk came through the criticism a Pharisee addressed to the Lord Christ, because He did not wash before eating. …… We have already dealt with the rite of washing practiced by the Jews, and its importance to them in our interpretation of the gospel according to Mark (7: 1 – 23); and in our study of the sayings of the Lord Christ against the formal and literal worship of the scribes and the Pharisees, in our interpretation of the gospel according to Matthew (Chapter 23) …… Here we present some commentaries:

1- If that Pharisee who invited the Lord Christ to eat in his house, was probably there, heard His words, and those of the woman who blessed her who bore and nursed Him (27); and was probably one of the Pharisees who sought a sign from heaven, his invitation of the Lord Christ was not out of true love, but withy the intention to set a snare for Him, to see whether He follows the Jewish traditions in eating and drinking, or not. The Lord Christ accepted his invitation, and purposely did not wash before eating, not that there is something wrong with washing, but intended to correct the wrong concepts adopted by the Pharisees, and to bring them forth to the befitting worship, practiced by the Spirit and the Truth.

   Talking about the simple eye and the lighted lamp, if the eyes of that Pharisee were simple, and his inner lamp was lighted, his heart would have been preoccupied with the Messiah and with the perception of the truth of His Person, being “*the desire of all nations*” (Haggi 2: 7); in whom the prophesies are fulfilled; and for whose death Abraham exulted; but through his evil eye, the Pharisee was more preoccupied with the outer washings, and with his criticism of the Savior of the world.

2- Seeing how the Pharisee was shocked to see the Lord eat without washing, The Lord said to him:

   “Now, you Pharisees make the outside of the cup and dish clean, but your inward part is full of greed and wickedness. Foolish ones! Did not He who made the outside make the inside also?” (39, 40).

   According to St. Ambrose, the cup mentioned by the Lord refers to the body. The cup is breakable if it drops on the floor; so is the body which dies within a moment and get corrupted. And it refers, as well, to the suffering of the body endured by man, in case the inner longings of his heart are aflame.

I wish, we, therefore, would not concentrate upon the outer appearance of the cup, but on how we would be able to drink it, enduring the sufferings of the body, if the heart is aflame with love…… That is why the Lord Says: "*The spirit is indeed willing, but the flesh is weak"* (Mark 14: 38)..It is therefore, befitting of us to start by making the inner Spirit strong, to be able to endure the weaknesses of the body.

According to St. Cyril the Great: [It was great foolishness of them to assume that washing before eating would purify them of every defilement. Yes, it would be of benefit for those who are not clean in their body; but how could it purify against the defilement of the heart and mind?!,

Tell us, O Pharisee, where, in the Holy Book, did Moses present such a commandment? Where did the Lord make it a law to wash before eating?.....Yes, the splashing with water was given as a commandment by Moses for the sake of the purification of the body, being a symbol of baptism, which is indeed holy and purifying in Christ…….. Those called to priesthood had to be washed with water, as Moses did with Aaron and the Levites with him; by which he proclaimed baptism through the symbol and the shadow; and revealed that their priesthood does not bear what is enough for purification; but, on the contrary, was in need of the holy divine baptism for the sake of the true purification. The law, in a nice way, revealed to us that the Savior of all is capable of sanctifying and purifying of every defilement through the precious holy baptism, concerning us, the generation that was sanctified to God, and became His elects.

What did the Savior say?

He often took the chance to rebuke them, saying: "***Now you, Pharisees make the outside of the cup and dish clean, but your inward part is full of greed and wickedness"*** (39)….. As it was the time for eating, and of siting at the table, He presented a comparison of the cup and dish, revealing that it is befitting of those who faithfully minister to God, to be pure, not just of the bodily defilements, but also of the hidden ones in the mind; .As to saying: "*Did not He who made the outside, make the inside also?"* (40); He means that He who created the body, created the soul as well.

But the scribes and the Pharisees did not do that; hence the Savior said to them: *"You are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and uncleanness"* (Matthew 23: 27). The Lord does not want us to be like those, but to see us spiritual holy worshippers, blameless in the soul and the body.

According to St. James the apostle: "*Cleanse your hands you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded"* (James 4: 8); and to the psalmist David: "*Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me"* (Psalm 51: 10); and, on the tongue of God, Isaiah says: "*Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean. Put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes"* (Isaiah 1: 16)…… Notice the accuracy of expression: "*Put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes"*; For man can hide his evil from before the eyes of men, but not from before those of God]

According to St. Augustine: [He revealed that baptism purifies by faith, for faith is something inside and not outside. The Pharisees despised faith, by preoccupying themselves with the outer washing, while keeping their inside full of uncleanness]

3- Lest we may think that the inner spiritual life disregards the outer appearances, particularly concerning showing compassion toward our needy brethren, He said:

"***But rather give alms of such things as you have; then indeed all things are clean to you"*** (41)

The true spiritual worship is set upon getting out of the 'ego'; which is translated through giving alms with love. About giving alms and its activity in our spiritual edification, many fathers have spoken:

+ Giving alms is greater than offering a sacrifice ……It opens up heavens; according to what is written: "*Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God"* (Acts 10: 4).
  It is greater than virginity; as it drove the foolish virgins away from the wedding; while admitting the wise ones in.
  (St. John Chrysostom)

+ Give a true alms, give mercy.

  Hear the Holy Book say: *"Those who fear the Lord, seek to please Him"* (Sirach 2: 16). Your soul is like beggar before you; Going back to your conscience, however you live in evil or denial, you will find your soul begging for need and grieving for poverty ……. Give her bread …….. If the Pharisee asks: [What kind of bread shall I give her?] The Lord will answer: Give her alms …….. In other words, love yourself as it is befitting, through loving the others; and give yourself alms through giving them to the others.
  (St. Augustine)

+ Alms are effective way of healing, put on all wounds.
  Alms are better than fasting or lying on the ground; even though those are painful and tough; yet giving alms is of more benefit.
  (St. John Chrysostom)

+ Just meditate in these group of medications: God's mercy purifies us; His words purify us; according to what is written: "*You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you"* (John 15: 3); and "Almsgiving saves from death" (Tobit 12); and, "*Store up almsgiving in (the heart of the poor), and it will rescue from every disaster"* (Sirach 29: 12).

(St. Ambrose)

+ Yes, that there are many ways for the good behavior, like meekness, humility, etc. ….. Why then has the Lord concentrated on compassion? …… The Pharisees were a greedy bunch, enslaved by the ugly profit, and gathering riches in wicked ways. On them the Lord of all said: "*How the faithful city has become a harlot? It was full of justice; righteousness lodged in it, but now murderers. Your silver has become dross; your wine mixed with water; your princes are rebellious, and companions of thieves. Everyone loves bribes, and follows after rewards. They do not defend the fatherless, nor does the cause of the widow come befo9re them"* " (Isaiah 1: 21 – 23).

He purposely looked on the infirmity that prevailed on them, to rid them of its evil, and to give them instead the purity of mind and heart, to become true worshippers.

So always did the Savior according to what suits the plan of salvation. Whenever He was invited to a banquet, He, Himself, gave spiritual food, not only to His hosts, but to all who attended the banquet.

(St. Cyril the Great)

+ The Merciful commands us to show mercy. Seeking to rescue those whom He saved by a great price, He commands those who got defiled after gaining the grace of baptism, to purify themselves anew.

(St. Cyprian the martyr)

4- Lest you may practice giving alms with impurity, namely by a pervert conscience; He made it clear that, by seeking from them to give alms, He demands them to have the truth and the love of God, and not the practice in its apparent formalities; saying:

"Woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue, and all manner of herbs, and pass by justice and the love of God. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone" (42).

They cared for the little things for the sake of the human glory, to appear to men as elaborate in keeping the law, while they disregard the justice of God (the Truth), and do not bear His love inside themselves.

On this St. Ambrose comments, saying: [They keep the useless things, while disregard those that grant hope]. And according to St. Cyril the Great:[The Pharisees were elaborate in keeping the commandments that concern the temporal things, like paying tithes, in which they have a portion of their own; whereas the things that concern the eternities they disregard. Their care for paying tithes was not out of their zeal to keep the law, as much as for their greed.

5- The most serious enemy against the spiritual life is probably the love of being ahead of every one, and of having temporal honors; hence the Lord warns us by saying to the Pharisees:

Woe to you Pharisees for you love the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the market places. Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you are like graves which are not seen, and the men who walk over them are not aware of them" (43, 44).

According to St. John Chrysostom: [That is truly how miserable and mean it is; for, while we may be worthy of being counted as temples, behold, we suddenly become like graves full of corruption].

And according to St. Cyril the Great: [If the others admire us without search nor perception of our true condition; yet this does not make us elect in the sight of God, who knows everything; hence the Savior counsels us, saying: "*Woe to you, for you are like graves which are not seen, and the men who walk over them are not aware of them". ……*.I therefore, implore you to meditate in how powerful and obvious this parable is. I implore you to meditate in how hypocrisy is always rebuked; on account of that it is like a serious illness hated by God and men. …… I wish we, as true worshippers, do not seek how to please men. About this, the blessed Paul says: "*For do I now seek to please men? For if I still pleased men, I would not be a bondservant of Jesus Christ"* (Galatians 1: 10). The way the false golden coins are hated and despised, so is the hypocrite, by God and men.

6- Having shown the danger of hypocrisy, the love of money, and of temporal honors, on the inner spiritual life, He addressed a lawyer to warn him against the literality of spiritlessly interpreting the law, saying:

"Then one of the lawyers said to Him, 'A teacher, by saying these things You reproach us also'. And He said, 'Woe to you also lawyers! for you load men with burdens hard to bear, and you, yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers. (45, 46).

According to St. Cyril the Great: [It was befitting of that lawyer, having heard the words of the Savior, and felt that they also touch his own weaknesses, to come with the spirit of humility and present repentance, being like a patient seeking healing from the divine Physician, saying: "*Heal me, O Lord, and I shall be healed; Save me, and I shall be saved"* (Jeremiah 17: 14). …….. But that lawyer, approached the Savior, accusing Him that by saying such things to the Pharisees He reproaches the lawyers also. He protested for the sake of his honor, instead of seeking salvation from his weaknesses.

The Pharisees and the lawyers have shared many faults among themselves: The Pharisees isolated themselves from the commons, as an aristocratic religious group; whereas the lawyers, counting themselves as the teachers of the law, they claimed to be the only ones to answer the questions concerning the law and the statutes. Both of them carried the spirit of pride and arrogance; had the image, and not the spirit of godliness.

To reveal the shortcomings of the lawyers, the Lord said: "*Woe to you, also lawyers, for you load men with burdens, hard to bear; and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers"* (46).

According to St. Cyril of Alexandria: [The law for the Israelites was hard to bear, as confessed by the disciples of the Lord themselves, when they rebuked those who sought to put the new believers under the burden of the rites of the law, saying: "*Now, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?'* (Acts 15: 10)……..The Savior Himself taught us the same when He cried out saying: "*Come to Me all who labor, and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls"* (Matthew 11: 28, 29). …….He says that those under the yoke of the law "*labor and heavy laden";* and calls Himself "gentle", having nothing of the law in Him. According to Paul the apostle: "*Anyone who has rejected Moses law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses* (Hebrew 10: 28) . Therefore He says: "Woe to you, lawyers -- for loading men with heavy burdens of the law, b*urdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers"*. ……While commanding the commitment to keep and not to break the commandments of Moses, , and condemn to death whoever despise them, they themselves do not care for the least of those commandments, ……..Paul the apostle says: "I*ndeed you are called a Jew, and rest on the law, and make your boast on God, and know His will, and approve the things that are excellent, being instructed out of the law., and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, having the form of knowledge and truth in the law. You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that a man should not steal, do you steal? You who say, 'do not commit adultery', do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God through breaking the law?"* (Romans 2: 17 – 23)

A teacher will be despised and lose his good reputation if his behavior contradicts with his teachings.

Commenting on the words of the Lord against the lawyers, Father Theophlactius says: [It is truthfully said that they do not touch the heavy burdens of the law with one of their fingers; namely, that while they do not keep the least of the commandments in the law, they appear as though they keep it all and deliver it intact to others. In contradiction to their fathers, they walk without faith, and without the grace of Christ].

According to St. Gregory, bishop of Nyssa: [Although they, themselves, are weak wrestlers, they are very cruel on the sinners; loading the burdens of the law on the others, while they, themselves are too weak to bear, and not even to approach, or to touch them through the serious life].

7- For the lawyers, it did not stop at holding fast to the deadly letter, without the spirit of the commandment; but they turned the law into a burden too heavy for men to bear; when they find for themselves excuses to flee from touching even the least of the commandments……. They did not stop at claiming to have the knowledge and the teaching, without practicing the virtuous life, but they did what is more cruel and bitter; they cared to build and decorate the tombs of the prophets, to earn glory from men; not perceiving that by so doing, they testify against themselves that they are the children of those who murdered the prophets; ……They consummate the evil doings of their fathers by killing the Heir Himself – the Savior Messiah. ……The past binds to the present and to the future; for the cross was there before the sight of the Lord, and He saw their hands shed His innocent blood. By that the contemporaries of the Lord partake of the crime of their fathers concerning the killing of all the prophets, "*from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah who perished between the altar and the temple"* (51)

According to St. Cyril the Great: [Their fathers killed the prophets; and by coming to believe that those were saintly prophets, they became judges against those who killed them. By honoring those prophets, they condemned their own fathers on their crimes, when they, themselves, were on their way to do likewise, and even worse; on account of that they were about to kill the Ruler of life, and the Savior of all; then to add to it other crimes, like stoning St. Steven to death, not for something bad he did, but because he counseled them with what came in the divine inspirations; and other crimes against every saint who preached the gospel, the message of salvation. …… The Pharisees and the lawyers proved that they were haters of God, proud, and lovers of pleasures more than of God; and by every way they hated to have salvation for themselves, for which the Lord added the word 'woe' whenever He addressed them].

And according to St. John Chrysostom: [Seeing how those who sinned before were punished, the Jews did not try to mend their ways, but committed the same sins. Although no one would be punished on the sins committed by others, yet, they could not present an excuse of their own responsibility of the deeds of their fathers, on account of that they did the same sins done by their fathers, and even wose..

"From the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah who perished between the altar and the temple" (51)

In the days of St. Jerome, there were three views concerning that Zechariah: That he might be one of the minor prophets; ……or the father of John the Baptist; ……..or Zechariah the son of Jehoiadah (1 Chronicles 14: 21). St. Jerome believed that he was the third choice, while St. Gregory, the bishop of Nyssa believed that he was the father of St. John the Baptist, ……If we consider the view of St. Jerome, adopted by many scholars, Abel was killed in the field, while Zechariah was killed in the court of the temple……. It is as though the blood of martyrs that was unjustly shed filled both the public places and the sanctuaries of the Lord. And considering that Abel was not a priest, while Zechariah was, the rows of the martyrs were joined by the commons as well as by the priests.

8- Ending His woes to the lawyers, the Lord said:

"Woe to you lawyers, for you have taken away the key of knowledge; you did not enter in yourselves, and those who were entering in you hindered" (52)

According to St. Ambrose: [The lord rebukes the Jews, and proclaims that they are worthy of the judgment to come; for, while taking upon themselves the task of teaching others the divine knowledge; they hinder them by not following what they teach].

And according to St. Cyril the Great:[Those who search the holy books. And know the will of God; in case they are men of virtue and of zeal on reforming the others, and have sound leadership, they will be rewarded by every blessing; which is confirmed by the Savior, saying: "*Who then, is a faithful and wise servant, whom his master made ruler over his household, to give them food in due season? Blessed is that servant, whom his master, when he comes, will find so doing. Assuredly, I say to you that he will make him ruler over all his goods"* (Matthew 24: 45-47). Whereas if he is slothful, lazy, and a cause of offense to those who are left under his rule, and made them pervert away from the straightforward way; such a miserable servant will surely fall under punishment. Again the Lord Christ says: "*Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone is hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea"* (Matthew 18: 6). So the Lord proved to those who counted themselves scholars of the law, namely the lawyers and the Pharisees, that they commit such sins; saying to them: "*Woe to you lawyers for you have taken away the key of knowledge ……" .*"*the key of knowledge*" refers to the law itself, and the justification in Christ, namely, believing in Him. Even though the law is shadows and symbols, yet these shadows conform the truth to us, and these symbols portrays the secret of Christ to us in different ways ……For every word in the divinely inspired Holy Book, looks forward and refers to Him ……It was therefore the duty of those who claim to be lawyers, scholars of the law of Moses, and of the words of the saintly prophets, to open the doors of knowledge to the multitudes of the Jews; for the law leads men to Christ, and the godly proclamations of the prophets lead to His recognition

……..but they did not; and on the contrary, they took away "*the key of knowledge*", by which the law and the true faith of Christ are understood; for, according to Isaiah, by faith will be the knowledge of truth: "*Unless you believe, you will not understand" (*7:9)……. They took "the key of knowledge" away, with the intention of keeping men from believing in Christ the Savior of all].

"And as He said these things to them, the scribes and the Pharisees began to assail Him vehemently, and to cross-examine Him about many things; lying in wait for Him, and seeking to catch Him in something He might say, that they might accuse Him" (53, 54).

Even though He intended for their souls to be healed of their inner wounds; yet, they foolishly increased their opposition through the hardness of their hearts and the corruption of their minds, and sought to catch Him in something He might say, that they might accuse Him …….By that they proclaimed more their inner corruption, emotionally, willingly, and mentally.

==========

CHAPTER 12

THE HEAVENLY FRIEND AND THE LITTLE FLOCK

In the previous chapter the Lord exposed the weaknesses of some of the religious leaderships, for what they bore of formalities in worship without depths ,and for the literality in understanding the law and the commandment without spirit; together with a bitter bond with the love of the world and the temporal honors. Now, the heavenly Friend came to set for Himself a new flock to be His One body; whose most important feature, is to be in harmony with the features of its heavenly Shepherd, its Groom, Savior, and Head working in the body.

1- The new flock and the leaven of the Pharisees	1 – 3
2- The new flock and the fear	4 – 5
3- The new flock and the trust in God	6 – 7
4- The new flock and the testimony	8 – 12
5- The new flock and the covetousness	13 – 21
6- The new flock and the temporal things	22 – 23
7- The new flock and the heavenly things	24 - 31
8- The new flock and the Father’s pleasure	32
9- The new flock and giving alms	33 – 34
10- The new flock and the coming of the Friend	35 – 40
11- The new flock and the faithful stewardship	41 – 48
12- The new flock and the fire of the Spirit	49
13- The new flock and the sufferings	50 – 53

14- The new flock and the spirit of discernment 54 – 56
15- The new flock and the forgiving love 57 – 59

1- THE NEW FLOCK AND THE LEAVEN OF THE PHARISEES:

Intending to set, out of His believers, a new flock that bear His heavenly features, the first commandment our heavenly Friend presented to His Church through His disciples was to purge out “the old leaven”, the leaven of the Pharisees, namely “hypocrisy”, lest the Church would be set on the wrong foundation. He intended to purge out the corrupt old leaven, to present us as the new Passover unleavened bread. As according to Paul the apostle: “*Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?. Therefore, purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ was sacrificed for us; Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth”* (1 Corinthians 5: 6 – 8)

“In the meantime, when an innumerable multitude of people had gathered together, so that they trampled one another, He began to say to His disciples first of all: ‘Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy” *(1)*

By hypocrisy, the Pharisees intended to catch the Lord Christ by words of His mouth, to keep the people away from Him, so that their popularity, authority, and honor would not collapse; but they only got the opposite result; as tens of thousands of people came together around the Lord, longing to encounter Him …….Before the Lord warns His flock against hypocrisy of the Pharisees, the Evangelist Luke, with a practical lesson, showed how hypocrisy fails to realize the goal of those who walk according to it. Father Theophlactius says: [Truth is strong; whereas deception is weak].

By hypocrisy man may intend to draw all around himself, to keep them from the truth; but hypocrisy will eventually be revealed, and people will abhor the phypocrites, to get instead attached to the truth. On another aspect, the Lord Christ likened hypocrisy to the leaven that works actively in spite of its tiny size in the whole lump, to proclaim that it corrupts man, makes him lose every purity and spiritual virtue in the heart, mind, and feelings, even if he clothes himself with a deceptive garment of apparent godliness, ability to teach, and jealousy on the sanctities.

+` Hypocrisy is hated by God and men, brings forth no reward nor benefit of salvation to the soul, but will rather be a cause of her perdition.

If it so happen that hypocrisy is not temporarily revealed, yet it does not endure for long, just like how an ugly woman appears after removing her outer makeup.

+ Hypocrisy is foreign to the features of the saints; for “

“For there is nothing covered that will not be revealed, nor hidden that will not be known” (2).

As all our words and deeds will be revealed in the ultimate day of judgment, hypocrisy therefore brings trouble and carries no benefit. It is befitting of us to be justified as true worshippers who minister to God with clear and obvious features.

(St. Cyril the Great)

+ Leaven may be commended for being bound to the bread of life; but would be reproached if it refers to malice and wickedness.

(St. Gregory the Nezianzen)

+ Hypocrisy is called “leaven”, for it deceives the intentions of those who practice it. Nothing would corrupt the personality of man like hypocrisy.

(Father Theophlactius, bishop of Bulgaria)

+ It is as though He says: [O Pharisees! Whatever you talk in the darkness, in the hidden places of your hearts, will be exposed in the light; for I am “The Light”; By My light, therefore, all your deceptions and oppression will be revealed, Whatever you whisper in the ears of one another will be loudly proclaimed on the rooftops

The “light” could also be understood as the (gospel), and by the “rooftops” as (the high souls of the disciples). Whatever plotted by the Pharisees, will be evealed through the light of the gospel, by the great preacher – the Holy Spirit -- who prevails on the high souls of the disciples.

2- THE NEW FLOCK AND THE FEAR:

Seeking in His church (the new flock) to bear, not the leaven of the Pharisees, namely, hypocrisy, that makes her outer appearance differ from her inner self; the Lord seeks from her to walk only by the fear of God, and not of men. For whoever fears God will never care for the judgment of men; something that will take away from him every hypocrisy, for he seeks neither the commendation of men nor their rebuke; and demands neither reward nor fear of retribution.

"And I say to you, My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do.But I will show you whom you should fear; Fear him who, after He has killed, has power to cast into hell, yes, I say to you, fear Him" (4, 5)

+ We should fear the suffering of the soul, not the killing of the body; for death is a natural end of the temporal suffering of the body, but the suffering of the souls is eternal. We are committed to fearonly God.
(St. Ambrose)

+ This commandment concerns those who love Him…… But who are they? ……We may say that they are those with similar mind, who are zealous to follow His lead; on which Peter the apostle exhorts us, saying: "*Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind"* (1 Peter 4: 1). He gave His life for our sake, "He was adrift among the dead like the slain who lie in the grave" (Psalm 88: 5). Death did not attack Him because of sin like us, for He was, and still is, without sin; but endured the suffering for the sake of His unlimited love for us. Let us listen to Him saying clearly: "*Greater love has no one than this, than to lay one's life for his friends"* (John 15: 13). …….Will it not be counted bitterly mean not to pay Christ His debt back?

  In other words, we may say that, as His beloved, we are committed not to fear death, but rather to be like the saintly fathers. For when Abraham was tempted, he offered his own son, believing that God can raise him from the dead (Hebrew 1: 19). How can we have terror of death; when we know that "Life" was already made vain ?..... For Christ is the resurrection and the Life (John 11: 25).

  Let us also put in mind that crowns are acquired by strife; the strong wrestlers in the arena will reach perfection by experience, and training. Courage and alert mind are necessary to win battles; whereas whoever cast his armor down and flee away, will be despised by the opponent; and

even if he survives the battle, he will live humiliated ever after. While whoever hold fast in the battle, and fight with courage and might, will be honored and crowned, even if he falls down wounded. It is befitting of us, therefore to endure with perseverance and courage in the struggle to earn the great reward, and to acquire for ourselves the blessings of God; because failing to endure the death of body for the sake of our love for Christ, will only bring upon us an eternal and unceasing punishment. For man's anger (the opponent's) will eventually come to an end by the death of the body; while God's punishment will not be only on the body, but will come upon the soul to suffer as well, eternally.

I wish our portion would be the honorable death, which brings us up to the beginning of the eternal life, beside being necessarily bound to the abundance of the divine blessings. Let us despise and flee away from the shameful life, the hateful temporary life, which leads to a bitter eternal suffering.

(St. Cyril the Great)

+ Notice how our Lord made His disciples, above all, and exhorted them to despise death that brings terror to everyone; and how, at the same time He confirmed to them the eternity of the soul.

(St. John Chrysostom)

+ According to a saint, because fearing temptations, makes the body a friend of sin; the Holy Spirit, therefore, bring it to death, for otherwise, it will not prevail on sin.

If man intends to be a dwelling place for the Lord, he has to conquer his body, minister to the Lord, do according to the commandments of the Spirit, and keep himself from the deeds of the body, about which the apostle said that its fruition will give no pleasure to God..

I would rather die here, than to see the true death of the soul, namely the separation from God. I would rather die here for the sake of the purity, rather than live an evil life. I have chosen this death by my own free will for the sake of my sins.

(St. (Mar) Isaac the Syrian)

3- THE NEW FLOCK AND THE TRUST IN GOD:

Intending to encourage us in our spiritual strife, to keep us from fearing the death of the body, the Lord Christ confirmed to us His care even for our body, saying:

"Are not five sparrows sold for two copper coins. and not one of them is forgotten before God. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows" (6, 7)

+ Meditate in the greatness of His care for those who love Him. If the Keeper of the universe so cares even for the things of little value, and condescends to talk about the little sparrows; how could He ever forget those who love Him, and are worthy of having Him visit them; being aware of all the little details of their life, even the count of the hair on their heads?

  I wish we do not doubt that His rich hand grants His grace to those who love Him. ……He will either not allow for us to fall into temptation; or if, by His wisdom, He allows for us to fall into its snare, it would be to be glorified through our sufferings; granting us the power to endure, as testified by the blessed Paul, saying: "*God is faithful, who will not allow you to to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation, will also make the way to escape, that you may be able to bear it"* (1 Corinthians 10: 13)

  (St. Cyril the Great)

+ If God will not forget the sparrows, how could He forget man? ……If the sparrows and the count of the hair on our head are not hidden before His knowledge, how foolish would it be for us to think that God is not aware or disregard the faithful hearts?

  The five sparrows, I believe, are the five senses of the body: the touch, the smell, the taste, the vision, and the hearing. The sparrows, being too weak to fly up to reach the exalted fruits and the spiritual banquet, have to seek their food on the ground, to fall into the nets of the hunters. ……Our enflamed nature, activities, and purity, will all be scattered through our care for the earthly physical things, and our love to acquire the luxuries of this world. Now after being so captivated, there will be before us two options: either the bondage to sin, or the liberation from it. Christ sets us free, redeems and saves us; whereas the enemy puts us for sale to bring us to death. ……Matthew referred to (two) sparrows, which are the body and the spirit.

  By grace, we are granted to fly up; but the temporal pleasures captivate us and makes the spirit heavy by the snares of evil, to fall down to the level of the heavy nature of the body.

It is written that not one hair will fall down without the allowance of God; for the one to fall goes down to earth, whereas the one to fly is carried up by the divine care . Let us then not fear the authority of the devil, but fear the wrath of God.

The soul is likened to a sparrow, being said: "*Our soul has escaped as a bird from the snare of the fowler"* (Psalm 124: 7), and, "*How can you say to my soul, 'flee as a bird to your mountain?"* (Psalm 11: 1); and "*I am like a sparrow alone on the housetop"* (Psalm 101: 7). ……Man is formed of two sparrows in one; like the unity of the two wings which cooperate to let the spiritual nature soars up beyond the physical nature.

There is the good sparrow that, by nature (spiritual) is able to fly; and an evil sparrow that cannot fly because of its love of the earthly defilements; the later one is sold for two copper coins ……..How cheap are sins! ……Death includes all, while virtue is precious! ……..The enemy puts us for sale like captive slaves, for low price; whereas the Lord treats us like good servants whom He created according to His image and likeness.; and highly evaluates us; according to the words of the apostle: "You are purchased for a high price" (1 Corinthians 6: 2); not of silver or gold, but of the precious blood. Christ died for our sake, and liberated us by His precious blood, as said by Peter the apostle in his epistle: "*Knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot"* (1 Peter 1: 18, 19). Yes it is precious blood, for it is of a blameless of body; the blood of the Son of God who redeemed us, not only from the curse of the law (Galatians 3: 13),, but also from the eternal death of sin

(St. Ambrose)

+ The five sparrows could be understood in a secret way as the five senses of high perception of the heavenly things: that behold God, hear the divine voice, taste the bread of life, smell the fragrance of Christ, and hold fast to the word of life.

(The scholar Origen)

+ These senses are sold for two copper coins, namely for the two testaments the old and the new; hence they are not forgotten before God.

(Father Theophlactios)

+ Man's head – secretly –refers to his mouth; and his hair, to his thoughts, uncovered to God.

(St. Cyril the Great)

4- THE NEW FLOCK AND THE TESTIMONY:

"Also I say to you, whoever confesses Me before men, him the Son of Man will also confess before the angels of God; but he who denies Me before men, will be denied before the angels of God. And anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him, but to him who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven. Now, when they bring you before the synagogues and magistrates and authorities, do not worry about how or what you should answer, or what you should say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say" (8 – 12)

If sin has corrupted the five sparrows, namely our five senses; that, instead of setting forth by the Holy Spirit toward the divinities to see, hear, taste, touch, and smell what are eternal and divine; they fall into the snares of evil desires, get bound by the ropes of the world, under the violent authority of the enemy, to become helpless and unable to fly. Man, …….. In his religion, man could not soar up, but, in his worship and preaching, became a captive of vain glory, hypocrisy, and sometimes of covetousness for material things, that gave him the kind of mind of the Pharisees and the lawyers; to care for the deadly letter instead of the deep spirit that edifies.

The Lord redeemed us to set us free from these snares to live in this world as true witnesses to the Savior through our heavenly life, our new mind, and our spiritual man, the work of our God ……. We testify to Him here that the Son of Man would testify to us in the heavenly Sanctuaries. He, who paid His blood a price for getting us out of the snare of hypocrisy; and confirmed to us that what we say in the darkness will be revealed in the light; and what we whisper in the ear will be declared on the rooftops; and what we do here in the darkness, or whisper in the ear will be declared before His saintly angels and saints in the great day of the Lord.

If the hypocrites who do evil in secret are exposed, the manifest and hidden knowledge of the Church is the confession of the Savior, to be truly glorified.

\+ The Lord therefore, is not convinced by the inner faith alone; but seeks from us the manifest confession; exhorting us toward trust and great love. And as that will be of benefit for all, He says: "*Whoever confesses Me ……..".*

(St. John Chrysostom)

+ *“If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus, and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved”* (Romans 10: 9)…….. In this phrase, the secret of Christ was made clear in a marvelous way.

Before anything, we are committed to confess that the Son is begotten from God the Father;…….. the only begotten Son from His very essence;……. God the Word; ……..the Lord of all; ……..has not got the Lordship from outside, but it is referred to Him being the Lord truly and naturally; the same as God the Father.

Secondly, it is befitting of us to believe that God has raised Him from the dead, namely, that He became Man, ……suffered in the flesh for our sake, ……and was raised from the dead……The Son is the Lord, the Lord by nature, being God the Word above all creation. This is what the wise Paul the apostle teaches us, saying: “*For even if there are so called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as there are many gods and many lords), yet for us, there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we for Him, and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and through whom we live”* (1 Corinthians 8: 5, 6).

Whoever confesses Christ before men that He is the Lord God, He will confess him before His angels…… But where, and how? …… Obviously at the time when He comes down from heaven in the glory of His Father, together with the saintly angels, at the end of this world; when those who truly confess Him, with the sound and un-hesitated faith, will be crowned …….There, the congregation of the saintly martyrs will glitter, those who endured the strife even to shedding their blood; those who honored Christ by their perseverance, did not deny the Savior; and His glory was not unknown to them. They are commended by the saintly angels, who glorify Christ, the Savior of all, for the sake of the honors He grants to His saints who are worthy of them. That is what is proclaimed by the Psalmist, saying: “*Let the heavens declare His righteousness; for God Himself is Judge”* (psalm 50: 6).

That is the portion of those who confess Him. …….As for those who deny and despise Him, they will also be denied; when He says to them what was said by one of the prophets in the old: “*As you have done, it will be done to you; your reprisal shall return upon your own head”* (Obadiah 15) ; He will deny them by saying: “*I do not know you; ……Depart from Me, all you workers of iniquity”* (Luke 13: 27).

Who are those who deny, and be denied?

Those who, when they fall under persecution, and go through tribulation, deny faith. Such will entirely lose hope; no human words could express the extent of God’s wrath upon them; and the unquenchable fire they will go through.

The same will be the way of those who follow the heresies that dare to deny that He is the Word of God, the only begotten Son; and that He is God by nature.

(St. Cyril the Great)

+ There are other ways of denial as explained by St. Paul, saying: "*They profess to know God, but in works they deny Him"* (Titus 1: 16); ……. and, "*If anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever"* (1 Timothy 5: 8); ……..and, "*Therefore, put to death ……covetousness, which is idolatry"* (Colossians 3: 5).

  And as there are different ways of denials, there are obviously, as well, different ways of confessing Him,……. In Greek, saying: "*Whoever confesses (in Me)";* shows that confessing Christ will not be realized by man's own strength, but by the help of a higher grace. As for the denial, He says: "*Whoever denies Me……..".* If he reject the grace, he would deny; he, however, will be judged on account of that it is his own fault, having rejected the grace.

(St. John Chrysostom)

I wish therefore, we testify to the Lord and confess Him by our mouth, heart, true faith, and befitting behavior, through the work of His grace, grantor of the strength of testimony and work; so that our Christ, risen from the dead will clearly show transfigured in our depths, through our daily new life we have in Him. By such testimony and this daily confession, we become worthy of our Lord confessing us before His angels; as He counts us heirs of God, together with Christ, partners in the eternal glory; and have a place in the bosom of God the Father.

And as the confession of the Lord Christ has its irreversible public eternal reward; so will His denial has its eternal punishment. That is why, lest anyone would probably collapse with the spirit of despair, in case he falls in denial, out of weakness; and lest he probably think that he cannot return and repent, but will fall into an eternal perdition; He says:

"***Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him"*** **(**10);

by which He opens wide the door of hope through repentance; which is also confirmed by the rest of his declaration, saying:

“***But to him who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven”*** (10).

Namely, Whoever rejects the work of the Holy Spirit, the Grantor of repentance and forgiveness, will lose His forgiveness. We have already dealt in detail with the topic of “Blaspheming the Holy Spirit”; in which we confirmed that the unforgiven blaspheme is the persistence on no repentance

Some misunderstood that divine proclamation, counting that whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man, being incarnated, it will be forgiven him, if he discovers the truth and repent; whereas whoever speaks a word against the Holy Spirit will have no repentance. This interpretation is unacceptable; on account of the Holy Book confirms that all sins on which repentance is presented will be forgiven. That was also proclaimed by the fathers of the church, opening the door of hope, even before the heretics and their followers, who blasphemed against the Holy Spirit; if they retreat from their fault; and they were actually received by the Church when they did repent.

St. Ambrose confirms that the discernment here is based on the difference of the works of the Holy Trinity; and that denying or blaspheming the Holy Spirit means the complete rejection of His work; namely the rejection of the work of repentance, exhorted by the Spirit in us. Which is clearly shown by the same talk of the Lord, adding:

“For the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say” (12).

Namely, whoever rejects His hidden work in the heart, will not be forgiven until he return and receive Him anew.

As testifying to the Lord Christ was most probably going to put His disciples before the synagogues, the rulers, and the authority; He granted them the possibility of work; by putting them in the hands of His Holy Spirit, saying: "*For the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say"* (12)

+ He says that what we utter and answer (in the time of tribulation) is granted to us in this very hour from heaven; namely, it is not we who speak but the Spirit of God who will never forsake those who confess Him, nor separate from them, but will speak in them, and is crowned in them.

+ His work is to make us conquer, and get the conquest by submitting the enemy in our great strife.

(St. Cyprian the martyr)

5- THE NEW FLOCK AND THE COVETOUSNESS:

If in all His previous talk He exhorted us to testify to the Lord and to confess Him with the heart and the tongue, even in the darkest situations and tribulations; Now He seeks from us to testify to Him through the practical virtuous life; warning us against the most dangerous enemy that may come upon the believer, namely 'covetousness and the love of the world'; which could confuse even the ministers of the Word into the temporal issues, to draw their hearts away from bearing the features of their heavenly Groom.

Then one from the crowd said to Him:

"*Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me", to which He answered him:* '*Man, who made Me a judge or an arbitrator over you?'; then He added:*, '*Take heed and beware of covetousness'"* (14, 15).

By this answer by the Lord, He meant:

1- To raise the work of preaching the word above the material problems; so that the ministers of the Word would only care for bringing every soul forth into the salvation work and the care for eternity.

2- Not to use *faith* to the account of the care for the temporal issues; but to concentrate on the eternal joy.

3- He warns His new flock against covetousness, that may corrupt the collective life, as well as the heart.

+ The last phrase was given to prepare us to endure the suffering for the sake of the testimony to the Lord, to despise death; and to warn us against falling under punishment that waits for those who are not forgiven. And on account of that covetousness, generally, corrupts virtue, that is why a new commandment and a proverb were added: saying: "*Man, who made Me a judge or an arbitrator over you?"*

  He, who came down for the sake of the divine things, did not wish to be a judge over the earthly things; ……the Judge of the living and the dead, who rewards everyone according to his deeds, refused to arbitrate in the laws concerning the riches of this world. ……Whenever you seek from Him, therefore, meditate in the Giver and not in the gift; and do not ever assume that the mind that cares for the high issues, could worry about the lowly ones. That is why the Lord sent away the one who cared for the mortal things and not the heavenly ones.

  Choosing not to arbitrate between the brethren as a judge, the Lord showed that love, and not the court, should be the way for all the worldly affairs; for it is vain to accumulate the wealth, if man does not know how to spend it.

(St. Ambrose)

+ Yes, the Son appeared in our image; and God the Father set Him a Head and King over Zion, His holy hill (Psalm 2: 6); yet, the Son clearly showed the nature of His mission, saying: "*I came to preach the commandment of God";* meaning that our Lord, the Lover of virtue, wants us to forsake the temporal earthly things, to flee from the love of the flesh, from the vain worry on work, from the evil desires, and not to care for building storehouses; but to despise riches and the love of ugly profit; He wants us to be good, to ;love one another, not to gather treasures on earth, and to soar above controversies and envy; not to fight against our brethren, but welcome them even if they intend to abuse us; saying: "*From him who takes away your goods, do not ask them back"* (Luke 6: 30);but rather to strive for the sake of the things of benefit and necessary for the salvation of the soul.

  Not leaving us without teaching, He found it a chance to present a faithful word of benefit. He proclaimed: "*Take heed and beware of covetousness"* 15). He likened covetousness to the pit set by the devil to catch his victims, something hated by God (Colossians 3: 5),, and

called “idolatry” by the wise Paui; probably on account of that it only suits those who do not know God; or because it is equal to the iniquities done by the worshippers of idols and stone.

Covetousness is the snare set by the evil spirits, to draw the soul of man into the snares of the pit; To ensure their security, He said: *Take heed and beware of every covetousness”,* namely of both much and little covetousness; and of the deception of one man against another, for Covetousness is hated by both God and men.

This we learn fro God Himself who says on the mouth of His saintly prophets: “*Therefore, because you tread down the poor, and take grain taxes from him; Though you have built houses of hewn stones, yet you shall not dwell in them; You have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink wine from them; for I know your manifold transgressions, and your mighty sins”* (Amos 5: 11, 12). *And, “Woe to those who join house to house, add field to field, till there is no place where they may dwell alone in the midst of the land. In My hearing, the Lord of hosts said, Truly many houses shall be desolate, great and beautiful ones without inhabitants; for ten acres of vineyard shall yield one bath, and a homer of seed shall yield one ephah”*(Isaiah 5: 8-10). Having acquired houses and fields through oppressing the others, it would turn vain with no inhabitants, of no benefit for him as an evildoer; for God’s wrath will justily dwell over him

(St. Cyril the Great)

+ On another aspect, covetousness will be of no use, “***for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses”*** (15), and in his enjoyment of abundance, an obvious fact, as the duration of man’s life does not extend according to his riches. So says the Lord to rebuke those who gather the riches together, with the assumption that they are going to live a long life; something far from being guaranteed.

(Father Theophlactius)

“Then He spoke a parable to them, saying: The ground of a certain rich man yielded plentifully; and he thought within himself, saying, ‘What shall I do since I have no room to store my crops? So he said, I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build greater, and there I will store all my crops and goods. And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take you rease, eat, drink, and be merry’. But God said to him, ‘Fool, this night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided? So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God” (16 – 21).

In this parable, we should notice the following:

(1) According to St. John Chrysostom , that rich man erred to call his riches “goods”; for riches are not good nor evil in themselves. “Goods” are virtues like chastity, humility, etc.; if chosen by man; and “evil” is iniquity and transgression. Other things, though are counted as “natural”, neither good nor evil; but could be directed either way; For riches used for giving to the poor will be “goods”, whereas if they bear covetousness, will be counted as evil.

The saint has made this concept clear in many of his writings; saying: [No one can harm another, unless the later harm himself]. Namely, neither riches nor poverty would not harm man; What harm him are the evil of his inner heart, and the misuse of riches or poverty.

And as riches in itself is not “good”, St. Clement of Alexandria, in his book, confirms: [Riches in itself is not evil, but useful if used properly; for many rich people enjoy the kingdom of God through their love of giving alms.

(2) That rich man, mentioned by the Lord Christ, through caring only for the earthly riches, had his heart filled to the rim with the love of worldly things, the barns of his evil soul exploded for covetousness; and thought that he is capable of building new ones; but his soul was required of him when its barns were completely destroyed.

St. Basil the Great says: [He did not remember his fellow creatures, nor that he was supposed to give out of his abundance to the poor. While his barns were exploding for too much goods, the covetousness of his heart was never satisfied…… He said, “I Will pull down my barns”; Well said, for your evil barns are worthy to be pulled down, on account of that they give no comfort to anybody].

(3) That rich man did not perceive that God is the secret of the life of the human soul; whoever acquires Him will acquire life on an eternal level, and death will never prevail on him, but he will truly soar beyond the limits of time.

He erred when he evaluated his life by his riches; and once he came to have an abundance of riches, he thought that he already has many years

to enjoy his riches; and did not perceive that his soul would be reqired of him in the same night. According to St. Clement of Alexandria: [Man’s life is not set upon what he possesses]; And according to St. Cyril of Alexandria: [Man’s life, indeed, is not set upon what he possesses, but will counted blessed he who is rich by God].

(4) According to St. John Cassian: [The secret of the perversion of that rich man was his care for the morrow. I wish we never allow for ourselves to pervert away from the principles of asceticism].
And according to St. Augustine: [Do not you see that it would be out of covetousness to seek what are beyond the necessary things?..... Let us then beware of every covetousness, if we intend to enjoy the eternal wisdom].

(5) In the introduction to this book we said that it is the “gospel of joy”; for our heavenly Friend came to grant us through His friendship, an eternal joy that would never be taken away from us. We saw how this book opened with joy and praise, and how it ends with joy …….Intending to discern between the joy of the righteous, and that of the world, He gave that parable, in which the rich man says to himself “*Be merry”;* but within few hours his soul lost the fountain of her temporal merriness ……. and lost even her whole life, for she made the riches of this world the cause of her joy.

The material ma rejoices when he gets temporal things whatever their value are; but he will soon grieve if he loses even a little of what he gained, and loses his joy and peace. This is probably what St. Jerome intended to confirm by saying: [When we gain a penny we become full of joy; and when we lose half a penny we become drowned in grief].

(6) Commenting on the saying of the Lord, that his soul is required of him that same night, St. Gregory the Great says: [The soul is required by night is that who walked in the darkness of her heart, and not in the light of meditation]. And on it St. Augustine comments, saying: [You leave everything here, you, not only come out empty handed, but burdened with the sins over your shoulders. Whatever you gathered together here, will most probably fall into the hands of the enemies; and will be required from you].

6- THE NEW FLOCK AND THE TEMPORAL THINGS:

“Then He said to His disciples, ‘Therefore I say to you do not worry about your life, what you will eat; nor about the body, what you will put on. Life is more than food, and the body is more than clothing” (22, 23).

Intending to raise His new flock up to bear gradually, features befitting of Him, our heavenly Friend Lord Jesus Christ, after exhorting them to confess their faith in Him, He warned them against covetousness, as a dangerous enemy by which man would lose his relationship with God and men, and have his inner life destroyed; then He gave them the parable of the foolish rich man, who put his heart in earthly barns, exhorting them and us not to worry about the non-essentials; and now He brings them and us up to a higher level, namely not to worry even for the necessities like food and clothing. Confirming that, being our Creator who gave us life, would He not care to provide us with food; and having made our bodies, would He not care to provide us with the things to put non? ……..He intends for His new flock, not to be in a condition of slothfulness or laziness, but to have a balanced mind with no worry nor anxiety; to lean peacefully upon the chest of His Good Shepherd.

+ The words: “Do not worry” do not mean (do not work); but not to have your minds bound to the earthlies; for man can work without having worries.

(St. John Chrysostom)

+ He did not just say, ”Do not worry”, but he added “about your life”; namely, do not concentrate your care on such things, but on greater things; for your life is indeed more than food, and your body is more than clothing. ……. Beside this, it would be mean for the zealous lovers of virtue, in order to be justified before God, to be preoccupied with nice attires like little children, or to hold rich banquets; for following such things will be a multitude of vicious covetousness; and the ultimate result would be to apostacise from God; being written: “*Do not love te world or things of the world”* (1 John 2: 15); and, “*Do you not know that friendship of the world is enmity with God?”* (James 4: 4). We should then keep our feet away from the evil desires of the world; and rather to rejoice in the things that bring pleasure to God. …….. You may wonder: Who then will provide us with the necessities of this life? To this He answers: Let the Lord be the subject of your trust; for He obviously promised to provide you even with the little things (quoting His care for the lilies of the field and the ravens), to confirm that He would certainly care for the big things.

(St.Cyril the Great)

According to St. Ambrose: [God has created the body and the soul together in unity; for the body is the clothing for the soul; and the soul is the life for the body. He, therefore, intends for us not to worry about food and clothing, but about the soul and the body together, for the sake of reaching the perpetual eternal life. He intended for us to soar even beyond the necessities; not to disregard them, but not to let them absorb our mind, and destroy our inner peace; but to practice it by a holy mind, to see together with the apostle that whether we eat or drink, we would do it for the glory

of God; even our amusement, should be be in our Lord Jesus Christ. By that, man would live in the world without worry, and succeed here, and to gain hundredfold through his inner peace; and that would be counted as a deposit for him on an eternal level.

Life without worry is the secret of the prosperity, peace, and joy of the believer in this world, and his glory in the eternal world.

7- THE NEW FLOCK AND THE HEAVENLY THINGS:

God does not intend to deny His rational flock of anything; for he has created everything for the sake of man; but, seeing how man got attached to the world, and corrupted his heart with covetousness, and his soul with worries, and his life with being preoccupied away from his creator, He counselled him to forsake the temporal things to enjoy the heavenly things; He intended for him to forsake the gift to get attached to the Giver with his whole heart, to have an abundance of gifts. Hence the Lord Christ continued His talk to us to confirm three things:

(1) God is not hard toward us, but He is a Lover of man. If, for our sake, He cares for His irrational creation, feed the ravens, and clothes the lilies of the field exalted beauty, Would He rather not care for man, for whose sake He created the ravens and the lilies of the field? (24)

(2) Worries will not reform us; If we will not be able to add one cubit to our stature, why then shall we live worried, and lose our inner peace and our relation with God, not even for temporal benefit?! (25).

(3) God does not intend deprivation for its own sake, but intends to grant us what is greater: "***Seek the kingdom of God, and all these shall be added to you"*** (31). In other words, When the Lord finds our heart not worried about the temporal things, He will enter into it and sets His kingdom, without depriving us even from what we have forsaken.

"Consider the ravens, for they neither sow nor reap, which have neither storehouses nor barns, and God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds? And which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature? If you then are not able to do the least, why are you anxious for the rest? Consider the lilies, how they grow, they neither toil nor spin, and yet I say to you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. If then God so clothes the grass which today is in the field and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will He clothe you, o you of little faith? And do not seek what you should eat, or what you should drink, nor have an anxious mind, for

all these things the nations of the world seek after, and your Father knows that you need these things. But seek the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added to you" (24 – 31).

We have already quoted commentaries of some fathers on these evangelic phrases; Here we add more of them:

+ If the birds of heaven, which neither sow nor reap an abundance of harvest, are perpetually sustained by the divine care, it is rather befitting of us to see that our covetousness is a sign of our poverty.

  The many and abundant sources of food for the birds of heaven, are not of its own making, for they do not know private possession; and the fruits given to them are possessed by all. We, on the other hand, have lost the public possessions , and sough the personal ones,

  I wish you do not look at the goods as your own possession; for God intended for the food to be your mutual possession together with the animals and the birds.

  The birds of heaven, not seeking private possessions, will never know need for food, noe envy ither birds.

  "Consider the lilies, how they grow ……" ; By these words the Lord calls us to trust in Him that He grants us mercy. The literal meaning of these phrases is that we cannot add one cubit to our stature; while the spiritual meaning is that we are not able to surpass the limits of our level without help from God.

  The Lord put the lily in a position higher than that of man himself, made it of more glory than men, represented by king Solomon, who enjoyed the privilege of building the temple of the Lord apparently, the representative of the Church of Christ, symbolically.

  The attractive colors of the lily refer to the glory of the angels of heaven, the lilies of this world, who shone with their light upon the world, and distributed the sweet fragrance of Christ. Being supported by their prayers for our sake and their help, we could say: *"For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved"* (2: 15). We should not be hindered by any emothion, nor be disturbed by any necessity of work, but keep in our souls the blessings of the divine freedom, and the gifts of the divine nature.

  Yes indeed, it is fitting for the Lord to refer to Solomon, clothed in glory …… for he used to cover his physical nature with the power of the spirit; and to clothe it with the splendor of the works of the spirit.

  (St. Ambrose)

+ That is right, for the lilies of the field and the other flowers, bear an exalted beauty of their colors; which man kept on attempting to imitate by painting; yet however high was his artistic endeavor, he could never reach the high level of nature itself. We labor in vain however hard we try.

(St. Cyril the Great)

+ I wish we do not seek the material food, but that which touch the salvation of the soul. I wish we do not seek the luxurious attire, but seek how we could keep our bodies from the eternal fire and judgment. …… Let us then seek His kingdom; Let us care to become partners of the kingdom of Christ.

+ Worrying about the seen things is the portion of those with no hope in the life to come; and those without fear of the judgment to come.

(St. Gregory, bishop of Nyssa)

The Lord Christ intends to raise us, His new flock, to live like the birds of heaven, rising up toward the heavenlies; not to worry about personal possession, without earthly storehouses; but to soar as though in eternity, in an atmosphere of complete love; and to live like the lilies of the field, bearing the splendid angelic love, which is not of our own making, but of the exalted making of God….. To see in God, our Father (31) who cares for our partnership in His kingdom, presenting to us the temporal things, as something cheap and of secondary importance, compared to His eternal fatherly gifts.

8- THE NEW FLOCK AND THE FATHER'S PLEASURE:

"Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (32)

How a comforting phrase to call God “Our Father” ……to be sure of His care and ordination to our account. Yes indeed, the Church will perpetually be “the little flock”, for many are called, but few are selected, and, even though they so few to disappear in the crowd of the world, they are counted in the eyes of the Lord who said to the prophet Elijah, when he thought that the little flock have completely perished: “*I have reserved seven thousand in Israel; all whose knees have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him”* (1 kings 19: 18).

They are a little flock, not only concerning their count, but also concerning the human possibilities, with no temporal power, but are the subject of the pleasure of God the Father, and heirs of the eternal kingdom……. Even though they are the little flock in the sight of the world, but, on the chest of God, they enjoy His divine grace, and take by force the kingdom of heaven.

+ This fact is a spiritual comfort, being the only way that leads us to the sure faith

  By saying “*Do not fear”,* He means they should believe, without any doubt in that sure thing, that their heavenly Father grants the way of life to those who love Him; that He will never disregard His own, but will open up His hands to satisfy the entire world with goodness.

  He, who grants such great and precious things, who gives the kingdom of heaven; Will He not have compassion on us?! Will He not provide us with food and clothing?!..... What earthly goods could be compared to the kingdom of heavens; or with what God will grant of unperceivable or unutterable things?! “*of what eye has not seen, nor ear hears, nor have entered into the heart of man; the things that God has prepared for those who love Him”* (1 Corinthians 2: 9); for it is written that “*All flesh is as grass ,and all the glory of man is the flower of the grass; the grass withers and its flower falls away, but the word of God endures forever”(*1 Peter 1: 24); and, “*The world is passing away, and the lust of it”* **(1 John 2: 17).** The things of the world could not be compared with the divine things; If God grants His kingdom to those who love Him, Will He not provide them with food and clothing?!

  He called them “little flock”; for we are fewer than the uncountable hosts of angels, whose ability would unmeasurably surpasses our mortal things . That is what the Savior taught us by Himself in the parable He presented in the gospels, saying: “*What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost until he finds it. And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing more than in the ninety-nine which are not lost* (Luke 15: 4, etc.)……Notice that, even though it is a little flock concerning its nature, number, and honor, if compared to the uncountable high spiritual hosts**;** yet they enjoy the indescribable goodness of the Father, and will be given a portion together with the exalted spirits, namely the kingdom of heaven.

(St. Cyril the Great)

+ By “the little flock”, our Lord means those few who intend to become His disciples; to show that the saints in the world look few because of their optional poverty; or compared to the multitudes of angels who incomparably surpass all what we cherish…….. The title “little” has been given to His elect, compared to the huge count of the wicked ones; or for the sake of godly humility.

Father Theophlactius)

+ Make sure to belong to this elect few, and not to walk slothfully; live like the few to be worthy to enjoy God together with them; “*For many are called, but few chosen”* (Matthew 20: 16).

(Father John Cassian)

+ Each one of us has his own little flock whom he leads to the green pastures

(St. John Chrysostom)

9- THE NEW FLOCK AND GIVING ALMS:

If the Lord Christ has called His flock as “little”, to be counted worthy of the pleasure og God the Father, who grants them the kingdom; it would be fitting of that flock to declare their longing for that free kingdom, through forsaking the treasures of the world, and giving them to the poor, as though keeping them in the new house, namely in heaven. By this the Lord Christ gives us a new concept of giving alms, which is emptying the heart of the love of the temporal things, to fill it instead with the heavenly ones.

“Sell what you have and give alms; provide yourselves moneybags which do not grow old, a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches nor moth destroys; for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (33, 34)

According to St. Augustine: [I wish his works proclaim his voice]. Namely, if the believe talks about the kingdom; let him declare this talk of his, practically by giving alms.

+ Let our desire for the things to come hold fast; Let us store our hope in the things to come as a treasure for ourselves; Let us gather together for ourselves all those things by which we would become worthy of the gifts of God.

(St. Cyril the Great)

+ Giving alms is a medication for every wound; Yet, it would be provided, not only by giving money, but also by giving everything by which man could gain another; For the physician treats, and the wise gives counsel.

(St. John Chrysostom)

+ On what basis are we committed to sell all what we possess? Is it because they are naturally harmful? Or they represent a temptation to our souls?

To this we answer, firstly, that if all things in the world are counted in themselves as evil, they would not be the creation of God, "*for every creature of God is good"* (1 timothy 4: 4); and secondly, that the commandment of our Lord teaches us to uproot the evil in us, and not to present it another, saying: "*Give alms".*

(St. Basil the Great)

(10) **THE NEW FLOCK AND THE COMING OF THE HEAVENLY FRIEND:**

While raising the hearts of His little flock toward heaven, and seeking from them to present all their treasures to the heavenly storehouses, where no thieves approach, nor moth destroy; God enflames their hearts by the coming of the heavenly Groom, the Shepherd of the new flock; so that the body be girdled as though prepared to depart together with Him; and the soul as a lamp burning by love of the Groom to come; and all what are in the being of man to become in a state of watching and alertness, so that all would depart to where the Groom will be.

"Let your waist be girded, and your lamps burning; and you yourselves be like men who wait for their master when he will return from the wedding; that when he comes and knocks, they may open to him immediately" (35, 36).

What are the girded waists but the chaste body that walks in a proper and appropriate way? …… And what are the burning lamps but the souls, kindled with the Spirit of God, the Grantor of enlightenment?! ……...And what are the men who wait for their master but the energies, motives, emotions, feelings, and gifts of man?!..... All work with full alertness for the sake of the Groom to come and reign.

+ To gird the waists by a dead leather girdle, means that man brings to death all the members that embody the evil and unclean desires; to perpetually keep the commandment of the gospel: "*Let your waists be girded"; interpreted by the apostle, saying: "Therefore, put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry"* (Colossians 3: 5). …… In the Holy Book, we find that those who gird their waists are those who bring to perdition the seeds of the bodily evil desires; who strongly sing the words of David, saying: "*For I have become like a wineskin in smoke"* (Psalm 119: 83).

(St. John Cassian)

+ "*Let your waists be girded"* mean "*Depart from evil"* (Psalm 34: 14)…….. And, "*And your lamps burning"* do good".

(St. Augustine)

+ The "*girded waists*" may men (virginity) or (chastity); and the "*burning lamps*" may mean (the good deeds).

(St Augustine)

+ By saying: "*Let your waists be girded*", He means (control you evil desires); namely, do (chastity); while "*Let your lamps be burning*", means (burn it with the good works), namely by doing righteousness.

(St. Augustine)

+ "*Let your waists be girded*", namely, be perpetually ready to practice your Lord's work; and "*your lamps burning",* namely do not walk your life in the darkness; have the light of reason that reveals what you should do, and what you should nt; For this world is like night, in which those with girded waists practice an active practical life; like the servants who should have the burning lamps, namely, the gift of discernment, not only what they should do, but how to do it, lest he would probably hasten to fall into the pit of pride.

Let us, therefore strive to practice virtues, to have two burning lamps, namely, the reasonable understanding that shines in the soul, and the teaching by which we give light to others.

(Father Theophlactius)

+ It is befitting of the apostles to gird their waists to carry the lamp of the gospel

(St. Jerome)

+ Let no one say that the Lord intends for us to gird our waists and to hold the lamp of the gospel in our hands (in the literal meaning), for this interpretation only suits the foolishness of the Jews; For us, the girded waists means the readiness of the mind to work strongly in everything commended;…. And the burning lamp means the alertness of the mind and the reasonable joy.

(St. Cyril the Great)

We can also say that these two things refer to the fellowship between the body and the soul in the holy life; for the waist refers to the body which

Was disciplined and brought into subjection by the apostle Paul (1 Corinthians 9: 27); not to destroy it, but to raise it by the Holy Spirit, to live holy for the Lord; and the burning lamp is the soul with all her energies that shines her light in the body, for man to live in unity and harmony under the leadership of the Spirit to the account of the kingdom of Light.

If these two works are practiced by man through the spiritual work, the commandment of the Lord came proclaiming the commitment to work through the continuous alertness and watching, until the Lord comes, and dwells in our midst as the Groom of the soul; saying: "*And you yourselves be like men who wait for their master when he will return from the wedding, that when he comes and knocks they may open to him immediately"* (36)

+ It is befitting of us to look forward to the second coming of the Lord Christ from heaven, when He comes in the glory of the Father together with the saintly angels…….. Christ will come as though from a banquet, and dwells in weddings, which is befitting to Him; For up high, there is nothing there that bring grief to the nature above emotions, and beyond being affected by them.

(St. Cyril the Great)

+ When our Lord ascended to heaven He went to the wedding, and as a Groom He got attached to the heavenly angels.

(Pope Gregory the Great)

He comes as though from a wedding, and as a Groom He seeks His human bride; and when He knocks, they open for Him immediately (36). Knocking on the door means issuing the command for the resurrection; and opening it immediately refers to their immediate readiness to encounter Him; having went to sleep on this hope, anticipating the eternal day of the wedding.

The true believers will open the door to let the Groom enter, as though into His kingdom; and He, in turn opens for them to enjoy the bosoms of God the Father. The wicked, on the other hand will be risen as well, but as though to eternal death, they do not bear the gladness of the resurrection, nor enjoy seeing the divine glories …… Their doors remain closed, and through them the Groom will not enter; and "the *everlasting doors"* of the Groom will remain closed, and through them they cannot pass.

The Lord Christ goes on to say: "***I say to you that He will gird Himself and have them sit down to eat, and will come and serve them"*** (37)……
How amazing that the Groom girds Himself and honors His bride, let her recline and serve her by Himself. He serves those who have previously girded themselves in the world, and served the others to the account of the heavenly Groom, by which they were worthy to be served by Him.

Such a scene kindles the heart of St. John Chrysostom to say: [Hearing these things, it is befitting of us to care, not only for those who are of the household of faith (Galatians 6: 10), disregarding the others. In case you see one in tribulation, do not be inquisitive and bombard him with questions, but, as long as he is in tribulation, this should be enough for you to help him. For he is a man of God, whether he is a pagan or a Jew, in need of your help].

+ We shall be worthy of a like reward; He will gird Himself to serve those who have previously girded themselves.

(St. Cyril the Great)

+ He girds His loins with righteousness.

(The scholar Origen)

+ He girds His loins, namely prepares Himself for judgment.

(Pope Gregory the Great)

"He will gird Himself and have them sit down to eat, and will come and serve them" (37)

+ "He will have them sit down", as though to alleviate their toil, presents to them spiritual pleasures; and prepares for them a banquet of exalted gifts..

(St. Cyril the Great)

+ Sitting down (reclining) here implies comfort from much toil; life with no anxiety; change to the nature of those who live in the light, who enjoy all the holy feelings, and on whom all gifts will be poured, to fill them with joy. Jesus Himself will let them sit down to grant them an eternal comfort, and to grant them countless blessings.

(St. Dionesius the Ariobaghian)

Having revealed the condition of the little flock who anticipate the coming of their unique Friend, the One Shepherd, and the heavenly Groom; He again confirms to them their commitment to watch for that coming, saying:

"And if He should come in the second watch, or come in the third watch, and find them so, blessed are those servants. But know this if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into. Therefore you also be ready for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect" (38 – 40)

According to Father Methodeus, [The Lord Christ may come in the first watch of the night, when we are still in our childhood; may wait for us until the

second watch, namely, when we reach maturity (manhood); or even in the third watch, namely in our old age ……. We therefore should always be ready to encounter Him, whether as children, young men, or elders. ……St. Cyril the great presented to us the same interpretation.

11- THE NEW FLOCK AND THE FAITHFUL STEWARDSHIP:

Having drawn the heart of His little flock to Him to anticipate His ultimate coming, to enjoy the kingdom of God, Now the Lord Christ proclaims to them their commitment to faithful stewardship, to have a portion in that kingdom. saying:

"Then Peter said to Him, 'Lord, do You speak this parable only to us, or to all people? And the Lord said, 'Who then is that faithful and wise steward whom the master will make ruler over his household, to give them their portion in due season?" (41, 42).

Having heard that parable concerning the coming of the day of the Lord, which the Lord will proclaim His coming all of a sudden, asking them to watch in anticipation for that coming, St. Peter asked His Lord if that parable concerns only the disciples or all the people. …… He probably wondered in his depths, what does the Lord mean by saying "***those servants"***; Does He mean the disciples made stewards over "the household of God", as ministers and shepherds, until the coming of "the Master of the house"; or He means every believer, made steward over his own life, as the house of God, as a minister and a shepherd of the body, the soul, the energies, the talents, and all the possibilities to work together to the account of the Master of the house, the Lord Christ Himself?!

The answer of the Lord came as: "*Who then is that faithful and wise steward whom the Master will make ruler over His household, to give them their portion in due season?"* (42)

According to St. John Chrysostom [Our Lord did not present this question for He does not know who are the faithful and wise stewards, but He intended to reveal the rarity of their existence, in particular to be stewards over the church].

+ Whoever found faithful and wise, let him be ruler over the household of the Lord, to give them their portion in due season; namely to provide them with the word of teaching to nourish their souls; or the practical role model that conforms their life.

(Father Theophlactius)

+ The Lord ordained the apostles as stewards over His household, namely over those who were gained by faith to recognize His glory – faithful men of great understanding of the holy teaching.

He ordained them, commanding them to present the food allowed, not without discrimination, but in due season; namely the spiritual food presented as is befitting of every individual and whot satisfies him. For it is not befitting to give the instructions concerning all the points in the same way to all those who believe in Christ; being written: "*Be diligent to know the state of your flocks"* (Proverbs 27: 23). For if we present to ways of truth to someone who recently became a student, we have to use a simple way to teach him, not including anything difficult to understand or perceive. …….Something totally different from the way used to educate those who are well advanced in their mind, who are able to perceive the height, the depth, the length, and the width of the exalted concepts of the Godhead.; for, as we already said: "*Solid food belongs to those who are of full age"* (Hebrew 5: 14).

(St. Cyril the Great)

The coming of the Lord separates the faithful and the wise stewards from the slothful and violent ones, who work to the account of their own heroism, and not to that of their master; saying:

"Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. Truly I say to you, that he will make him ruler over all that he has. But if that servant says in his heart, 'My master is delaying his coming, and begins to beat the male and female servants, and to eat and drink, and be drunk. The master of that servant will come on a day when he he is not looking for him, and at an hour when he is not aware, and will cut him in two, and appoint him with the unbelievers" (43 – 46)

+ He who gives his fellow servants their portion of food with wisdom and in due season, will be very blessed, according to the Savior; for he would be found worthy of greater things, and would receive a reward befitting of his faithfulness ….That is what the Savior taught us in another location, when He commended the good and faithful servant, saying, "*Well done, good and faithful servant, you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things; enter into the joy of your Lord"* (Matthew 25: 21).

Whereas, if he was negligent and unfaithful in doing hi duties; did not watch over those chores, he considered not worthy of worrying about; and let his mind be preoccupied with the earthly things; corrupt it by unbefitting things; treats those under him with violence and cruelty; and does not give them their portion of food in due season; he will come to be in absolute misery; that is what He means by "cutting him in two, and appointing him

with the unbelievers.. For whoever does wong to the glory of Christ, or dare to despise the flock over whom he rules, will not differ much from those who do not know Christ, and will be counted among those who do not love Him. The Lord said to Peter: "*Simon, son og Jonah, do you love Me?..... Feed My lambs;…….. Tend My sheep"* (John 21: 15, 16)…….. For whoever tend His sheep, would love them; whereas whoever neglect, and forsakes them, hates them; and would be punished by being counted among the unbelievers.

(St. Cyril the Great)

+ "***He will make ruler over all that he has"***(44); not only over his household, but even over the heavenly and the earthly things to obey him; as it happened when the sun obeyed Joshua the son of Nun; and when the clouds obeyed the prophet Elijah……..All the saints as friends of God, used what belong to God.

Whoever lives his life in a virtuous way, and treats befittingly his fellow servants, provide them with their portions of food in due season; uses anger only against the haters of God for the sake of their repentance; ans practice physical desire within the limits, necessary b for the body, submitting it to God; God will set such a man over all what He has; for he is counted worthy to enjoy beholding the divine things through the light of meditation.

(Father Theophlactius)

I wish we then, be faithful stewards, not only as servants who give the spiritual food, befitting of every soul in due season, to be faithful over our fellow servants put under our rule; like the body with all its members, feelings,, the mind with allits energies, and the heart with all its emotions and instincts ……Let all we have in our hands, like a talent we received from the Lord, which we are committed to serve by the Holy Spirit; to provide it with satisfaction, not with the vain things of this life, but with the spiritual food, the word of God that satisfies our whole being. For then, God will set us rulers over all what He has; the heaven and earth would work together for our edification; and each of us would come to be like a king of authority in the Lord, the King of kings, and the Lord of lords.

It would not be befitting of us to beat "*the male and female servants";* the male servants refer to the energies of the soul, while the female servant refer to those of the body; the male servants are the sons of the soul; while the female servants are the daughters of the body. We are asked not to destroy these and those, but to nourish and to raise them, to make all holy for the Lord, work with harmony to the account of the kingdom of God.

Here the Lord presents to us an important principle for the reward; which is that the more the knowledge is, the more the responsibility will be, and consequently the reward saying:

And that servant who knew his master's will, and did not prepare himself or do according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he who did not know, yet committed things deserving of stripes, shall be beaten with few. For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required, and to whom much has been committed, of him they will as the more." (47, 48).

+ He will be beaten with stripes, albeit few, he who does not know his master's will and, consequently does not do according to it; Because he could have known if he had the intention to do.

It is a tough judgment under which those who know will fall; as shown by the disciple of the Lord Christ who said: "*My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment"* (James 1: 3). For the spiritual gift is abundant to those who rule over the people; according to Paul the apostle who wrote to his disciple Timothy, saying, "*May the Lord give you understanding in all things"* (2 Timothy 2: 7); and, "*I remind you to stir up the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands" n*(2 Timothy 2: 6). By that it is shown that, as much as the Savior of all gives them, the more He requires of them. ……. What are the virtues He seeks from them? Abidance in faith, the sound teaching; a good foundation in hope; unshaken experience, unconquerable spiritual strength, joy and courage in every good thing. By all that we my come to be a role model for the others in the evangelic life. If we so live, the Lord Christ, will give us the crown, by, and with whom will be the praise and the authority to God the Father and the Holy Spirit, forever and ever, Amen.

(St. Cyril the Great)

+ See how He clearly reveals that it would be a more serious thing for man of knowledge to sin, than for an ignorant man; Yet, we should not attempt to take refuge under the shadows of ignorance; for there is difference between being ignorant and not wishing to have knowledge. …….. He, about whom is written, "*He has ceased to be wise, and to do good"* (Psalm 36: 3), has the wrong will, and has no right to be excused by ignorance.

Although ignorance will not justify anyone or waive from him the punishment of eternal fire; yet it may probably make the punishment more endurable; for He did not say in vain, "*taking vengeance on those who do not know God"* (2 Thessalonians 1: 8)..

(St. Augustine)

+ What would be our excuse, we who were given the right to enter into the palace, ere counted worthy of entering into the temple, and became partners in the enjoyment of the holy sacraments, the Grantor of forgiveness; and yet, we still walk worse than the Greeks (the Gentiles), who did not have such a privilege?!

(St. John Chrysostom)

(12) THE NEW FLOCK AND THE FIRE OF THE SPIRIT:

From where can we acquire the faithfulness and the wisdom by which we can live as faithful and wise stewards, as sought by the Lord?! …….They are the gift of the fiery Holy Spirit, sent by the Lord Christ to His Church, to turn her members into what is like "a Cherubim throne kindled with fire"; to be worthy for having the Lord reign on us, to sit in us as though on His throne.

This divine fire is the gift of the Lord to us; saying,

"***I came to send fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!"*** (49).

+ By this He intended to present to us a disciple full of warmth and fire; ready to endure every danger.

(St. John. Chrysostom)

+ That is why the Spirit appeared as fire; and yet we are growing cooler and cooler like ashes, and less alive than the dead; while we see Paul the apostle soars up in the high heavens and the heaven of heavens; more zealous than the flames; conquers everything;, and prevails on everything, the lowly and the high; the present and the future.

  Let us remember the early believers who have forsaken all their possessions, profits, earthly interests, and temporal comforts, dedicated themselves completely to God; caring only to teach the word of God, day and night. This is the fire of the Spirit, who does not allow for an evil desire to be in us, for any of the things of this life to transfer us to another love.

  (St. John Chrysostom)

+ He said so to proclaim the extent of kindling love which He seeks in us; As much as He loves us, He seeks from us to love Him.

  (St. John Chrysostom)

+ He is God of all, "*who makes His angels spirits, His ministers a flame of fire"* (Psalm 104: 4) ……... Intending not to let the grace of the Spirit given to us to cool down, the blessed Paul warned us, saying: "*Do not quench the Spirit"* (1 Thessalonians 5: 19), to remain having fellowship with Christ, if we holdfast until the end, to the Spirit we received, saying, "*Do not quench the Spirit";* not that the Spirit is put under the authority of man, nor that He would endure any suffering by him; but because the non-thankful man, intends as though to quench the Spirit publicly, and comes to be one of the wicked who oppose the Spirit by unholy deeds …..

  Such fire held fast to the prophet Jeremiah, when the word of God was in him like a burning fire, which he was weary of holding it back, and could not (See Jeremiah 20: 9)…… Our Lord Christ, the Lover of mankind, came to cast such a fire down on earth; "*and how He wished it is already kindled"* (49).

  (Pope Athanasius the apostolic)

+ I wish the good understanding helps us, kindles and purifies our mind; He who came to send fire on earth to scatter the evil habits, and hasten to burn them down.

  (St. Gregory the Nezianzen)

+ When the Holy Spirit dwelt upon the disciples, it is written, "*There appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them"* (Acts 2: 3); ……. And as also said by the apostle, "*fervent in Spirit"* (Romans 12: 11); ……from Him comes the jealousy of love; for, "*Because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us";* …… contrary to what the Lord said, "*The love of many will grow cold"* (Matthew 24: 12); for the perfect love is the perfect gift from God.

(St. Augustine)

+ That is the fire which committed the two disciples walking along the Emmaos road to say to one another, "*Did not our heart burn within us while He talked to us on the road, and while He opened the Scriptures to us?!"* (Luke 24: 32).

(St. Jerome)

+ He does not mean the consuming fire, but that which exhorts on the good works; that makes the golden vessels in the house of the Lord in a better shape, by setting fire to the wood and straw (1 Corinthians 3: 12); and setting fire to every temporal hidden place where the temporal and mortal evil desires are stored.

Such divine fire has burned the bones of prophets; as according to the prophet Jeremiah, "*His word was in my heart like a burning fire, shut up in my bones; I was weary of holding it back, and I could not"* (Jeremiah 20: 9)

There is fire for the Lord, about which is said, "*A fire goes before Him"*

The Lord says about Himself that He is a "*Consuming fire"* (Psalm 3: 2; 24: 17; Deuteronomy 4: 42; Hebrew 12: 29).

The fire of the Lord is the eternal light; by which the lamps burn; about which it is said, "*Let your waist be girded, and your lamps burning"* (35); and about which, Cleopas and his fellow disciple testified that it was the Lord who put that fire in them, saying, "*Did not our heart burn within us?".*(Luke 24: 32); proclaiming the work of that fire that gives light to the depths of the heart. …….. Probably because of this, *"Behold, the Lord will come with*

fire" (Isaiah 66: 15). to burn all iniquities in the resurrection, and to fulfill, by His presence, the longings of everyone of His believers, and shine by His light on works and intentions.

(St. Ambrose)

+ We confirm that this fire sent by the Lord Christ is for the salvation of mankind and for their benefit, wishing to fill all our hearts with it. The fire here is the salvation message of the gospel, and the power of His commandments; For all of us on the earth, cold like dead because of sin and ignorance, will be kindled with the godly work, and come to be "*fervent in Spirit"* (Romans 12: 11)…….. Besides, we shall be fellows of the Holy Spirit, like fire inside us

It is customary for the Holy Book, the divinely inspired Scripture, to call the divine holy words, sometimes, as "fire", to show the activity and the power of the Holy Spirit, by whom we become fervent in Spirit.

One of the saintly prophets, speaking in the Person of God about the Lord Christ, the Savior of all, says: "*The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to His temple; even the Messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight. Behold, He is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of His coming?, and who can stand when He appears, for He is like a refiner's fire, and like the launderer's soap. He will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver"* (Malachi 3: 1-3). …. By "*the temple*", he means the truly blameless holy body, born from the saintly virgin by the Holy Spirit and the power of the Father; as it is said to the blessed virgin: "*The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the highest will overshadow you"* (Luke 1: 35). He counted Him "*the Messenger of the covenant",* having come to reveal to us the good will of God the father, and to serve us; the way He says about Himself: "*All things that I heard from My Father, I have made known to you"* (John 15: 15)…… And as those who know how to refine the gold and the silver, use fire, so the Savior of all refines the mind of everyone who believes in Him through the teachings of the gospel by the power of the Spirit.

How could we interpret the live coal that touched the lips of the prophet (Isaiah 6: 6, 7), and purged him of every sin? It is the message of salvation, and the confession of faith in Christ; which purify everyone who receive it in his mouth; as confirmed by Paul the apostle, saying: "*If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved"* (Romans 10: 9).

We may then say that the power of the divine message is like a live coal and fire. The God of all says to the prophet Jeremiah, "*Behold, I will make My Words in your mouth fire; and this people wood, and it shall devour them"*(Jeremiah 5: 14); and, "*Is not My word like fire?"* (Jeremiah 23: 29).

(St. Cyril the Great)

(13) **THE NEW FLOCK AND THE SUFFERING:**

The Lord grants His new flock His fiery Holy Spirit, His fiery words, and His fiery love, to make them live on a fiery heavenly level, that the events of this world could not hinder their progress toward the eternities. The coming of Jesus Christ, indeed, kindles the hearts with love, yet, it, as well, stirs up those of the unbelievers, even the close relatives, to disturb them; whereas the believers endure every suffering and anguish with a wide heart, like their Lord who says:

'But I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how distressed I am till it is accomplished. Do you suppose that I came to give peace on earth? I tell you not at all, but rather division; for from now on, five in one house will be divided three against two, and two against three. Father will be divided against son, and son against father; mother against daughter, and daughter against mother; mother-in-law against daughter-in-law, and daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law" (50 – 53)

What is the baptism by which the Lord was baptized, but enduring passion even to death, giving His blood for our sake. It is befitting of us, therefore to bear His feature, and receive for His sake the spiritual strife even to blood, namely to death; as, according to the apostle: "*For Your sake we are killed all day long"* (Romans 8: 36).

Why is baptism so called?..... for by it we bear the features of the Lord Christ; He buries us together with Him to be risen together with Him as well;, bearing the power of His resurrection in us. This, according to the scholar Tertullian, is acquired in the water of baptism, or through martyrdom. These two forms of baptism, according to him – came out from His pierced side, from which came blood and water (John 19: 34)

+ By His “*baptism”* He means His death in the flesh; and by His “*distress”*, becoming sad and disturbed until He accomplished it. ……..What happened when He accomplished it? …… The salvation message of the gospel was proclaimed, not only in Judea, but all over the world……. For before the precious cross, and His resurrection from the dead, His commandments, and the glory of His divine miracles were done only in Judea; but, once Israel killed the Prince of life, He gave the commandment to His disciples, saying: “*Go therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit; teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you”* (Matthew 28: 19, 20).. ……..Behold, You now see the holy divine fire extended by the saintly preachers.

(St. Cyril the Great).

Now, as the Lord sprinkles His blood by which we are baptized; through which our heard kindles by the fire of His Holy Spirit, ……we are committed, the way He was distressed until He accomplished the work of redemption, to be, ourselves, distressed through suffering, to proclaim our perfect love for Him, to endure the tribulation even from our closest of kin, of our own household.

+ Do you think He intends to loosen the bonds among His beloved children? ……. How could that be, when “*He, Himself ,is our peace who has made both one ?!*” (Ephesians 2: 14); He who said: “*Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you”* (John 14: 27)?!

If He came to separate the fathers from the sons, and the sons from the fathers; How would He curse whomever does not honor his father (Deuteronomy 27: 16)?!

He intends for us to have God in the foremost place, to be followed by the love of the parents ……We should prefer what is for God to that for men; For, if the parents have rights, we have to give thanks to Him who gave them to us ……Besides, He added in another gospel: “*He who loves father or mother more than Me, is not worthy of Me”*(Matthew 10: 37). By this, God does not keep you from loving your parents, bot from preferring them to God. The natural relationship, being of the blessings of God, it would not be unbefitting of us to love the gift more than the One who gave it.

(St. Ambrose)

+ When you deny an earthly father for the sake of your godliness toward Christ, you will acquire Him who is in heaven, as your Father; ……..And if you reject a brother, on account of that he reproaches God and does not serve Him, you will be received by Christ as your Brother…….. Forsake, your mother according to the flesh, and acquire the High mother, namely the heavenly Jerusalem, our mother (Galatians 4: 26). Behold, you will have a glorified and strong membership in the household of the saints; and, together with them you will become a heir to the inexpressible, and unperceivable gifts of God.

(St. Cyril the Great)

St. Ambrose wonders why the Lord Christ said: "*Five in one house will be divided three against two, and two against three"* (52); when He mentioned six persons: (the father, the son, the mother, the daughter, the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law)?..... The answer came as such:

(1) The "mother" and the "mother-in-law" could be one and the same person; as the mother of the son could be the mother-in-law of his wife.

(2) Presenting to us a symbolic interpretation, he says: The house is man as a whole, according to the saying of the apostle Peter: "*You also as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ"* (1 Peter 2: 5). In this house, there are two dwellers -- the body and the soul, if they are on accord with one another in the name of Christ, the Lord who makes both one (Ephesians 2: 14); will be in their midst (Matthew 18: 19); for through this unity the body is enslaved in the service of the soul (1 Corinthians 9: 27). These two will stand against the three -- the perverted mind, the evil desire, and the angry nature.

(3) He also sees that house as including five senses -- smell, touch, taste, sight, and hearing. If, through the sight and hearing, we could separate these two senses together, to be sanctified, to oppose the sinful pleasures of the flesh, through taste (covetousness), touch, and smell; the two, therefore are divided against three.

According to some, this house refers to the world as a whole; the two refer to the Jews and the Gentiles, who oppress the Christians who believe in the Holy Trinity.

The father who stands against his son, is the devil who set himself father of the heathens, to find out that his own son has forsaken him through receiving the Christian faith, to have a heavenly Father.

The mother who stands against her daughter, is the Jewish Synagogue, stirred up against the Church of the Gentiles, who accepted the unity with the heavenly Groom Jesus Christ, He who, having come as a Son of the Jews according to the flesh. It is as though the Jewish Synagogue was stirred up against its own daughter and daughter-in-law…… against the Church of Jewish origin, and against the Church of the Gentiles.

The daughter and the daughter-in-law rebelled against that synagogue (the mother and the mother-in-law); when the Church rejected the literal works of the Jewish law, like the circumcision, and the bodily washings and purifications.

(14) THE NEW FLOCK AND THE SPIRIT OF DISCERNMENT

As the new flock confront suffering to partake of the passion of their Groom, it is befitting of them to walk with wisdom; and to have the spirit of discernment.

"Then He also said to the multitudes, 'Whenever you see a cloud rising out of the west, immediately you say, a shower is coming, and so it is. And when you see the south wind blow, you say, there will be hot weather, and there is. Hypocrites! You can discern the face of the sky and of the earth, but how is it you do not discern this time?" (54 – 56).

+ Here the Lord rebukes those who could discern the face of the sky, and are not able to reveal the time of faith; when the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

(St. Augustine)

+ Concentrating their attention on such matters, and through long experience, they could predict ahead the falling of rain, or the blowing of storms; something in which the sailors are experts. The Lord says that, it would good for those who could do such predictions, to concentrate their attention on important issues, as well……What are these issues? …… The law predicted ahead the secret of Christ, and revealed that He will shine at the end of time over the inhabitants of the earth, and will offer Himself a sacrifice for the salvation of all. If the law commanded to offer a lamb as a symbol of Christ at the evening time, when the lamps are lit; it is to make us understand that, when the world is about to come to an end, like the day, the great, precious, and indeed faithful passions will be realized; and the door of salvation will be opened wide before all who believe in Him; and will have their portion of an abundant happiness.

In the introduction of the Song of songs we find Christ call the bride, described in the book, to represent the Church, saying, “Rise up, My love, My fair one, and come away. For lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone, the flowers appear on the earth, the time of singing has come” (Song 2: 10 – 12)…….. As I already said, a kind of the tranquility of the springtime dwells on those who believe in Him.

The blessed prophets, with several ways, prophesied, preaching the secret of Christ; something that no one could doubt.

According to the Lord, it was their duty, yes, it was their duty, having such understanding, and ability to discern the face of heaven and earth, to experience the things to come, and not to let the storms to come on this world, escape their notice; when the south wind will blow, and the rain will pour; ……It was befitting of them not to let the time of salvation escape their notice; namely, the coming of our Savior, to present to humanity the perfect knowledge of the Truth, and when the grace will shine to purify the wicked.

(St. Cyril the Great)

If, according to St. Cyril the Great, that was a warning from the Lord Christ to the Jews who cared for the prediction of the atmosphere, more than for the prophesies concerning His coming, and consequently fell under the rain of the divine wrath, and the fire of the punishment through their denial; we can, as well, consider the talk of the Lord Christ from another angle, which is that He wishes for His flock to bear the spirit of discernment, not to protect themselves against the disturbance of the atmosphere conditions, but to enjoy the heavenly spiritual atmosphere. For the rain, as we found out in our interpretation of several of the books of the prophets, symbolized the gift of the Holy Spirit. The early rain was the gift of the Spirit in the Old Testament, before the coming of Christ; whereas the late rain, which grants maturity to the plants, is the gift of the Spirit in the New Testament, sent by the Lord over

His Church on the day of the Pentecost, as an unceasing deposit, to be enjoyed by every member through the water of Baptism. …….That rain that water the soul and turn it from barrenness to a fruitful paradise to the account of the Lord, dwelt on us through the clouds coming from the west, namely through the Lord Christ, who came to us through the human nature……..The 'heat', on the other hand, refers to the fiery Spirit who kindles the heart, as we have seen in the same chapter (verse 49)…… We are in need of both the rain and the fire, namely of the water and the fire; ……both refer to the gift of the Spirit, particularly through the water of Baptism.

16- THE NEW FLOCK AND THE FORGIVING LOVE:

The goal of "the spirit of discernment" is most probably for this flock to carry the spirit of forgiving love toward the faults of the others, to be worthy of bearing the feature of their heavenly Groom, the lover of mankind; hence He says:

"Yes, and why, even of yourselves; do you not judge what is right? When you go with your adversary to the magistrate, make every effort along the way to settle with him, lest he drag you to the judge, the judge deliver you to the officer, and the officer throw you into prison. I tell you, you shall not depart from there, till you have paid the very last mite" (57 – m59)

+ Let us now see who is that adversary with whom we must settle, lest he will deliver us to the judge ……If you err, the Word of God will be your adversary ……an adversary to your willo, until it comes to be the source of your salvation; ……. What a good and useful adversary!.....

  It is our adversary as long as we are our own adversaries; Namely, as long as you are your own adversary, the Word of God will be your adversary. Be your own friend, to conform to the Word of God…….. The "way" is this life.

  If you have a good will with your adversary, and settle with him; you will find a father instead of a judge; and instead of a tough officer, you will have an angel who carries you into the bosom of Abraham; and instead of the prison, you will find a paradise…… See how all things soon change on the way, in case you conform with your adversary!

  (St. Augustine)

==========

CHAPTER 2

THE BIRTH OF THE HEAVENLY FRIEND

Finding no place in the in inn to be born in, He came to us in a manger; but opened the gates of heaven, to let the simple shepherds hear the angelic voice congratulate them for the great joy that dwelt upon the whole people. Being brought as a babe into the temple, he opened the eyes of Simon the elder, who, perceiving the light proclaimed to the nations, he joyfully longed to set forth to paradise; And opened up the tongue of the prophetess Anna to sing a hymn of praise; And in his 12 years of age, He entered the temple to impress the elders by His teachings.

1-	The birth of our Heavenly Friend	1 – 7
2-	Giving the good tidings to the shepherds	8 – 20
3-	The circumcision of the Lord	21
4-	Offering a sacrifice	22 – 24
5-	The hymn of praise, sung by Simon the elder	25 – 35
6-	The hymn of praise by Anna, daughter of Phenoel	36 – 37
7-	The return to Nazareth	39 – 40
8-	Jesus in the temple	41 – 52

1- THE BIRTH OF OUR HEAVENLY FRIEND:

In the last chapter we saw God's amazing plan to prepare for the birth of our heavenly friend; We saw how heaven opened up to send the archangel Gabriel to give the good news of the birth of John the forerunner of the Lord to his father Zecharias; and to enunciate the good news of the holy conception to the girl of Nazareth……; We saw how Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit when she heard the voice of greeting of Mary, and how the fetus exultingly leaped in her womb ……. ; We saw how Zecharias' tongue opened up to sing praise of thanks to God, and to bless the God of Israel, not for the sake of the birth of John, but rather for Him, for whom John came to prepare the way; as by the eye of prophecy, he saw how the fathers and prophets who departed, exult on the fulfillment of God's promise of the coming of the Savior Messiah. …… Now he simply talks about the birth of the Lord, to tell us how God used even the human tools (like the Roman census, made the Jewish way), to realize His divine goals, and to fulfill the prophecies. The Evangelist says:

"And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be registered. This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city. Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David" (1- 4)

In the days of Emperor Cais, or Octavius Caipias, whom the senate granted him the title 'Augustus', meaning in Latin (the reverend); the decree was issued that all the world, namely all the countries under the Roman dominion, should be registered, to satisfy the ego of the emperor, to show off the extension of his authority; and to help him collect the taxes. According to the Roman style, the census could be carried out in any place without the need for any one to go to the city where he was born; but as a compliment to the Jews, it was done the Jewish way. So Joseph and Mary had to go to Bethlehem to be registered, for being of the house and the lineage of David; a task difficult on the elder Joseph and on the pregnant Mary; specially when the city was so crowded by those who came to do the same. Finding no place for themselves in the inn, they had to spend the night in a manger, where Mary had to deliver her firstborn.

According to appearances, all those circumstances came according to the Emperial decree of census, done according to the Jewish style; but the hidden fact is that all happened according to a divine plan which the prophets have previously proclaimed,

saying: "*But you Bethlehem, Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me, the One to be Ruler in Israel, whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting"* (Micah 5: 2).

The following are the comments of some fathers on the verses 1 -4:

+ "***A decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole world should register"***

Which implies that Christ was born in Bethlehem during the reign of Augustus Caesar**.** Someone may wonder why the Evangelist cared to mention all those details, as happening during the reign of Augustus Caesar. The answer for this is that it was imperative to fix the date when the Savior was born; being written: "*The scepter shall not depart from Judah; nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh comes; and to Him shall be the obedience of the people"* (Genesis 49: 10). And it was to teach us that, at the birth of the Redeemer, there was no king of the house of David on Israel; for Judah in that era was under the dominion of he Romans.

+ "***Because he (Joseph) was of the house and lineage of David"***

The Holy Book referred to Joseph's lineage to King David; a reference which implies that the virgin Mary, as well, was from the tribe of Judah; on account of that, according to the divine statutes marriage had to be carried out within the same tribe; namely the man and the woman, to marry, had to belong to the same tribe. This was also confirmed by the interpreter of the divine facts, the great apostle Paul, who testified that: "*It is evident that our Lord arose from Judah"* (Hebrew 7: 14)

+ "***With Mary his betrothed wife, who was with child"*** (5)

According to the holy Evangelists, Mary was betrothed to Joseph; which indicates that the pregnancy took place during the period of betrothal, and that 'Emanuel' was born by a miracle that contradicts the natural laws. The virgin Mary did not conceive by a human seed; for, according to the holy books, Christ is "the Firstborn of all"; and He is "the second Adam", who was born by the Holy Spirit, to convey to us by His spiritual birth, the grace and the Truth; as God intended for us to be, not any more, the children of man, but the children of God our Savior, according to the new spiritual birth, first by Christ who precedes us, being "The Firstborn of all creation" (Colossians 1: 15).

(St. Cyril the Great)

+ What would be my benefit to read this narration about how the first census was carried out in the days of Augustus Caesar, when Joseph and Mary had to go to Bethlehem among those crowd, to register in that record of the census, the coming of Jesus Christ to the world?!

As His coming to the world implied a super-natural secret, the name of Jesus had to be registered in that census, together with everyone else; to save all mankind, to sanctify them, and to grant them to live, with Him, one and the same life! By such a register, God intended to register, together with Him, all whose names are in the book of life (Philippians 4: 3), "*to rejoice because their names are written in heaven*" (Luke 10: 20), together with the saints.

(The scholar Origen)

+ What is the relationship between issuing a decree from a human authority, and the birth of Christ, but to proclaim the divine ordinance! For the human decree had the divine will as its source ; and had to be carried out in the name of the heavenly King and not the earthly one.

That decree of census did not actually come from Augustus Caesar, by from Christ to the whole world …….; "*For the earth is the Lord's, and all its fullness; the world and those who dwell therein"* (Psalm 23: 1).

(St. Ambrose)

St. Joseph, together with St. Mary, went forth to Bethlehem, meaning (the house of the bread), for there, "The Bread of Life" was to be
born ……His name was registered together with all men in the census, to partake of everything with us, for in the census
He was counted as one of us; even though, later on, "*He was numbered among the transgressors"* (Isaiah 53: 12), to have us counte in
His divine book as His friends.

"***While they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped***
Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn" (6, 7)

The following are comments by some fathers on the expressions: "Her firstborn Son"; and on that "He was born in a manger":

+ Here we say that every "only begotten son" is a firstborn; but not every firstborn is "an only begotten son". We understand that the word 'firstborn', does not imply that he will be followed by others; but implies that no one has preceded him in birth. God says to Aaron: "*Everything that first opens the womb of all flesh, which they bring to the Lord, whether man or beast, shall be yours, nevertheless the firstborn of man you shall surely redeem, and the firstborn of unclean animals you shall redeem"* (Numbers 18: 15). According to the words of God, the firstborn is the one who first opens the womb; or else, if the term only means he who has brothers younger than him, it would be impossible for the priests to decide who is the firstborn, until they see if there will be others following him; for if not, he would be firstborn, on account of that he is the only begotten son.

  And according to the Holy Book, as well: "*And those redeemed of the devoted things, you shall redeem when one month old according to your valuation, for five shekels of silver, according to the shekel of the Sanctuary, which is twenty gerahs. But the firstborn of a cow, the firstborn of a sheep, or a firstborn of a goat, you shall not redeem, they are holy; ….. You shall sprinkle their blood on the altar"* (Numbers 18: 16, 17). So was the divine command to sanctify every firstborn that first opens the womb of the clean animals; but the unclean animals will be redeemed, and their price will be given to the priests. ……. Now, how can I, or the priest, discern if the animal is a first born; for it may, or may not be followed by others. Shall I tell the priest, he has to wait until the matter becomes clear, or else, he shall get nothing from me ! Such would be foolishness; ……. A firstborn is the first to open the womb, whether he will be followed by others or not.

  (ST. Jerome)

+ Her firstborn does not mean that he is a brother among many, but of the firstborns; for the divine books used the word the "firstborn", or the "first" in many locations, yet mean by the word only one meaning; for it is written: "*I am the First, and I am the Last; Beside Me there is no God"* (Isaiah 44: 6).

  The word 'First' is added to the born, to mean that the virgin had no son except for Jesus the Son of God, according to the inspiration saying: "*Also I will make Him My Firstborn; the Highest of the kings of the earth"* (Psalm 89: 27); and the apostle Paul says: "*When He again brings the firstborn into the world, He says: 'Let all the angels of God worship Him'" (*Hebrew 1: 6).

How did Christ, the firstborn, enter into the world when He is above the world by His nature, and differs from the nature of men?

He enters into it when God became Man. And even though He is the only begotten Son of God, yet, for us, He is the firstborn, because we are all His brothers, by which we all became the sons of God.

Notice that Christ is called “the firstborn” according to us; and “the only begotten Son” according to the One God. Christ is the “only begotten Son” for He is the Word of the Father; with no one to partake of this sonhood with Him; for the Son is united to the Father; the One and only God; but Christ is “a firstborn” for us because He has chosen to condescend to the level of the natural creatures; hence you find the divine books refer to Christ the Son of God, as: “*The only begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father”* (John 1: 18). But when the Holy Book uses the word ‘the firstborn’, the holy Inspiration interpret it in what it implies,: “*that He might be the firstborn among many brethren”* (Romans 8: 29); and also: “*the firstborn from the dead”* (Colossians 1: 18), because He partook of everything in us except for sin; and because He is risen from the dead.

Besides, Christ, by His nature, is the only begotten Son of God; a God from God; an only begotten from an only begotten; and Light from Light. But He is the firstborn according to us, that whoever intends to be like Him will be saved by Him; for He is the firstborn, and we are His brethren.

(St. Cyril the Great)

+ Honor the manger; for even though man has lost sense (and became like an animal), in the manger he will find the Word as food.

(St. Gregory the Nezianzen)

+ Finding out that man has got down to the level of animal, God put Himself as food in the manger, so that, if we reject our animal nature, we would rise up to the level of understanding and perception befitting of the human nature. By approaching the manger, His special banquet, we shall find, not material food, but heavenly Bread – the living body.

(St. Cyril the Great)

+ He was born in the manger to lift you up to the altar.
He came down to earth to lift you up to heaven.
He found no place for Himself except in the manger, to prepare places for you in heaven (John 14: 2); and as the apostle says: “*Though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich”* (2 Corinthians 8: 9). My inheritance is the poverty of Christ; and my strength is the weakness of Christ.

(St. Ambrose)

+ O monks! ……. When the Lord was born on earth, He had no “cell” like you have, to be born in, nor a place in an inn. The human race had their place; but the Lord when born had none. He found for Himself no place among men, neither in ‘Plato’, nor in “Aristotle’, but only in a manger, among the simple and the innocent. Hence, in the gospel, the Lord Himself says: “*Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head”* (Lukeb9: 58).

(St. Jerome)

2- GIVING THE GOOD TIDINGS TO THE SHEPHERDS:

The birth of the Lord Christ took place in a manger away from people, unheard of, for kings, and elites; nor perceived by priests, high priests, scribes, Pharisees, or Sadducees. ……. Even though the earth so received its Creator in utter silence; yet it was

not possible for heaven to do the same; for an angel came to a group of shepherds, faithfully watching over their herds; who, in the simplicity of their hearts might have been preoccupied with their salvation.

"He came to them, stood before them and the glory of God shone around them, and they were greatly afraid; *Then the angel said to them: 'Do not be afraid. For behold, 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 Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: You will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger"* (10-12).

The following include comments by some fathers on that joyful tidings:

+ The prophets have proclaimed the Lord Christ being born according to the flesh, and taking the image of man in the fullness of times; And the heavenly creatures sang the song of joy and exultation for the birth of the Savior Redeemer. The shepherds in Bethlehem were the first to get the good tidings; being symbols of the spiritual shepherds to whom the Lord Jesus appears to preach His name everywhere, so did the shepherds of Bethlehem who preached Christ to their town, once they heard the pure angels sing the songs of joy and exultation.

  The angels were, therefore, the first to declare the birth of Christ to the world, and to proclaim the glory of Christ, the incarnate God, amazingly born by a woman.

  Someone may ask: How could the heavenly hosts glorify such a babe, covered with lowly swaddled cloths, and put in a manger, as God and Lord?!

  Now, man! You should think deeply in this great mystery. Even though God appeared taking the body of man; yet he was never separated from His Godhead. ……..Could you not understand that the only begotten Son of God, incarnated and chose to be born by a woman for the sake of His love for us, to take away the curse that dwelt upon 'Eve' the first woman, to whom it was said: "*In pain you shall bring forth children"* (Genesis 3: 16).?! ……..By the birth Of the incarnate Emmanuel, that curse was taken away.

  Besides, According to the apostle Paul: "*For the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the spirit"* (Roman 8: 3-4).

  What is the meaning of "*in the likeness of sinful flesh"*?
  It implies that the law of sin lies in the flesh, together with the vain evil desires, and the corrupt tendencies. But when Christ incarnated, and took on Himself our image, His flesh became holy and pure. Christ therefore, became like us, yet without our vain evil desires; and corrupt tendencies, that make us do the cursed, lowly, and mean things.

  Whenever you happen to see the swaddled babe Jesus, do not look at Him in the flesh, but in His divine glory; and lift up your mind to the heaven of heavens to see His exalted glory "*sitting on a throne, high and lifted up"* (Isaiah 6: 1); and to hear the songs of the Seraphim presenting glory, honor, and worship, to the Lord Jesus Christ, who fills the earth with His glory and greatness.

  You should look at the glory of Christ on earth, shining with light on the shepherds; while the multitude of angels sing the songs of joy and gladness. About which the prophet Moses, many centuries ago, prophesied, saying: "*Rejoice, O Gentiles with His people"* (Deuteronomy 32: 44).

Many prophets have been born, but the angels were never so exulted in the birth of any of them, as they were in the birth of Christ; on account of that those prophets were humans like us, ministers of the Lord, and bearers of the Word; while this was not the case with Christ, the God and Lord, who sends the prophets and saints; as according to the psalmist: "*Who, in the heavens, can be compared to the Lord?"*(Psalm 89: 6). . Christ has chosen to grant us the grace of sonhood, we who are under the yoke of the world, and, with our nature, are servants; whereas, by His nature, Christ is the true Son of God the Father, even after His incarnation. For, as I already said, despite taking on a body that was not his before, He remained as He is; as confirmed by Isaiah who prophesied, saying: "*Behold, the virgin shall conceive, and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel. Curds and honey He shall eat, that He may know to refuse the evil And choose the good"* (Isaiah 7: 14-15).

The meaning of all that is that Christ, while still a suckling babe, ate curds and honey; namely, being the incarnate God, He only knew the good, and was without the sin of man; a character only said of God, about whom is said: "*No one is good*

but One, that is God" (Luke 18; 19); Or according to the prophecy of Isaiah: "*Then I went to the propheteѕs, and she conceived and bore a son. Then the Lord said to me: 'Call his name: 'Maher- Shalal-Hash-Baz'; for before the child shall have knowledge to cry, 'My father', and 'My mother', the riches of Damascus …….. will be taken away"* (Isaiah 8: 3, 4). By the birth of Christ the thorn of the devil was broken, and his camp was ravaged, where he had many followers in Damascus who worshipped him. But, once the virgin gave birth to Jesus Christ, the power of the devil deteriorated; and his unjust oppressive reign disappeared; for even the pagans themselves came to have knowledge of the appearance of the Morning Star -- the Lord Jesus; and their delegates -- the Magi -- travelled from the East to Jerusalem; with no guide but the star in heaven. …….. Do not, therefore look at the babe born in the manger as just a suckling, but look at Him as the great, rich, Savior God, and the Redeemer, mightier than the heavenly hosts; worthy to have them proclaim His birth with joy, exultation, and gladness. ……How beautiful they greeted the infant Jesus with their songs.

(St. Cyril the Great)

+ Notice the roots of the birth of the Church; ……..Christ was born while the shepherds were watching over the sheep coming from the Gentiles, in the fold of the Lord, against the probable attacks by the wild beasts; they were watching as the Good Shepherd taught them.
The sheep are the peoples; the night is the world; and the shepherds are the priests.

(St. Ambrose)

+ The angel of the Lord came down to proclaim the good tidings of His birth. He did not go to Jerusalem, nor sought the scribes and the Pharisees; or entered into the synagogue of the Jews; but sought shepherds watching the night watch over their herd.

+ The angel of the Lord came to the shepherds and talked to them. …….. Now, hear, O angels of the churches; the angel of the Lord still comes down from heaven to proclaim to you, that *'there is born to you this day a Savior who is Christ the Lord"* . Yes indeed, if that Savior has not come, the shepherds of the churches would not be able to care for their herds on their own; and their care would be a failure, if Christ does not care for it together with them. Here we see how the apostles said, "*We are the plantation of God"*; the good shepherd is he who follows the lead of his Lord "the Good Shepherd"; who works together with God (the Father), and with Christ.

(The scholar Origen)

+ Behold, the archangels and the angels sing, in harmony; The cherubim sing their joyful songs of praise; and the Seraphim glorify Him;

All have united together to honor that glorified feast; all looking at God on earth, and man in heaven; They see Him who is from above dwell on earth for the sake of our salvation; and see man who belongs down, lifted up high by the divine mercies.

Behold, Bethlehem has become like heaven; there you hear the voices of hymns of praise sung by angels; and instead of the sun, there is the Sun of Righteousness shining on every side.

(St. John Chrysostom)

+ Today the watchers became happy; for the divine Watcher (Daniel 4: 13) came to wake us up. ……...Who can sleep tonight, when the whole world is watching?!

Adam, through sin, brought sleep over the world; but the Watcher came down to wake us up from the sleep of sin.

+ Today the higher watchers united with the earthly ones; for the divine Watcher came to create watchers among the creation.
Behold, the earthly watchers became fellow-watchers with the higher ones, and they all sang hymns of praise together with the Seraphim.

Blessed is he who becomes a guitar to praise you; for Your grace will be his reward.

+ The higher watchers uttered peace to the earthly watchers.
The higher watchers came down to proclaim the joyful good tidings to the earthly watchers
The higher and earthly watchers mixed together; all rejoiced because the world came to life.

(St.(Mar) Ephraim the Syrian)

Behold, God sent His angel to proclaim the great joy of the good tidings to the earthly watchers; Yet this angel was not just a messenger, but was a partner with humanity in their joy, together with all the heavenly hosts, for whom heaven opened its gate to let them go down to partake of our spiritual gladness. The Evangelist says:

"***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'"*** (13, 14)

+ "*Glory to God in the highest, peace on earth, goodwill toward men".* In heaven (the highest) there is no sin, but glorification and perpetual singing of praise; whereas on earth, where disobedience, dissension and division prevailed, there was an urgent need for peace, that is acquired by prayer; which comes not on all men, but only those of good will.

(St. Jerome)

+ The Evangelist mentioned the appearance of the heavenly hosts who followed the archangel. To whom will the angels raise honor except to their Lord; as it is said: "*Praise God in the highest"* (Psalm 135).

(St. Ambrose)

+ In case you wish to learn something from the cherubim and the Seraphim, listen to their hymn of praise, proclaiming God's secret holiness; saying: "*Holy, holy, holy, is the lord of host; the whole earth is full of His glory"* (Isaiah 6: 3)

(St. John Chrysostom)

Listening to this angelic hymn of praise, the church, longing to sing it together with the heavenly hosts, included it in the "Prime" prayer, in

the early morning, as is ordained in the laws of the apostles; and is still used to this very day; to start our day exultant with the angels for
the sake of His exalted work through His divine incarnation.

Commenting often on the phrase: "*And good will toward men",* St. Augustine confirms that God sanctified the human freedom of will, to be for us an option and not by force; and says somewhere else, [Righteousness belongs to the good will].

"So it was, after the angels had gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another: Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us; and they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the babe lying in a manger"(15, 16)

According to St. Ambrose, having believed in what the angel told them, the shepherds hastened to encounter that amazing newborn
…….. to testify to what they had come to know; and so became preachers of it:

"***And all those who heard it marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds"*** (18).

St. (Mar) Ephraim the Syrian presents to us a joyful portrait of the encounter of the shepherds with the baby Shepherd; saying:

> [The shepherds came bearing the best gifts out of their herds: delicious milk, fresh meet, and befitting praise …….. The meet they gave to Joseph, the milk to Mary, and the praise to the newborn.
> They brought a suckling lamb to present it to the Passover Lamb.
> They presented a firstborn to the Firstborn; a sacrifice to the Sacrifice; a temporal lamb to the true Lamb.
> How beautiful to see the Lamb receiving a lamb as a gift;
> The shepherds approached Him, and worshipped Him with their staffs; they greeted Him with peace., saying:
> *"Glory be to God, peace on earth, and goodwill toward men"*
> Behold, Moses' staff sings praise to Your staff, O Shepherd of all. Moses, the shepherd praises You, even though his sheep turned into wolves, and his herds into dragons.
> The shepherds praise You; for You reconciled the wolves to the sheep in the fold]

*"**But Mary kept all those things and pondered them in her heart".*** (19).

She was so impressed by her encounter with the shepherds; that, according to St. Ambrose: [From the words of the shepherds, Mary cropped the elements of her faith]. He also says: [If Mary was taught in the school of the shepherds; why would you refuse to be taught in the school of the priests? …….. If Mary kept the secret in her heart, why would you prefer to teach, rather than to keep silent?}

3 THE CIRCUMCISION OF THE LORD:

In our study of the book of Genesis, we saw that every male son of Abraham was committed to be circumcised, as a sign of a holy covenant with God, and an entrance into the fellowship in the holy congregation (Genesis 15); and everyone who is not circumcised will have his soul taken away. ……. But once the Word of God came incarnate, Even though He, Himself, was in no need to be circumcised for His own benefit; but having consented to bow, by His own free will, as our true friend, and to submit under the law, just like anyone of us (Galatians 4: 4), He lifted us up from under the law; for He alone is not a breaker of the law. The circumcision of the Lord, therefore was a new step walked by the Lord on the way of the cross, and of emptying Himself up, by being submitted under the law for our sake; to fulfill all righteousness (Matthew 3: 15)

The following are comments by some fathers on the circumcision of the Lord:

+ The babe was circumcised, about whom the prophet Isaiah said: "*For unto us a child is born; unto us a Son is given"* (Isaiah 9: 6);"He became under the law to liberate those who are under the law"

(St. Ambrose)

+ Now we see Him obey the law of Moses; in other words we see God, the Law-Giver, obey the law He, Himself, has given; Or according to the apostle Paul: "*Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world; but when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons"* (Galatians 4: 3-5).

Christ, therefore redeemed us from the curse of the law, we, who were enslaved by the law, and who showed complete inability to work by its statutes.

How did He redeem us? …….by keeping the commandments of the law. In other words, Christ the Redeemer, in our place, completely obeyed the Father; according to what is written: "*For as by one man's disobedience, many were made sinners; so also by one Man's obedience, many will be made righteous"* (Romans 5: 19).

Christ, as one of us, delivered Himself to the law; for it is befitting of Him to fulfill all righteousness; He took over Himself the image of a servant, came to be one of us, we, who by nature were under the yoke of the law; He even paid half a shekel, put by the Roman government upon individuals of the people….. Even though being the Son of God, yet He had to pay it; for He consented to take our image, completely, upon Himself.

If you, therefore, happen to see Christ obey the law, do not be dismayed, and do not put the Free Christ among the slaves in bondage; but think deeply in the depth of this great secret; the secret of redemption and salvation.

Having been circumcised on the eighth day according to the law, the Redeemer was given the name "Jesus", meaning (the Savior) of the people.

(St. Cyril the Great)

3- OFFERING A SACRIFICE:

According to St. Cyril the Great:
[After the circumcision of the babe Jesus, Mary waited for forty days after giving birth, to fulfill the days of her purification, then carried the Lord Christ, the Word God, who sits at the right hand of the Father to the temple in Jerusalem; there to present Himself, the way we do, before the divine presence in the human form. According to the law, being counted as a firstborn, holy and dedicated to God, His parents had to offer a sacrifice to God…… How wonderful is the secret of redemption and salvation!; "*Oh, the depth of the riches, both of the wisdom and knowledge of God"* (Romans 11: 33). He, who is in the bosom of the Father, the Holy Son, the Partner with the Father in the heavenly throne; by whom all things were created, submits to the requirements of the human nature, and has to offer a sacrifice to His Father, the Great God; ……He whom all creation worship and glorify, together with His heavenly Father.

The offering for Christ, as a firstborn was "***a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons***" (24). Now, let us see what these symbolize:

The turtledove is the most active and noisy among the birds of the field, whereas the doves are meek and quiet. So was the Redeemer like both of them; while He was most compassionate and merciful like a dove, He, as well, like a turtledove, actively went everywhere to give compassion, blessing, and comfort; according to what is written in the Song of songs: "*The voice of the turtledove is heard in our land"* (Song 2: 12). Christ made us hear the word of the gospel, the word of salvation to the whole world.

The turtledoves and the doves were therefore offered a sacrifice; like the Son who presented Himself before God the Father in the temple; namely, you could see the symbol and the fact in one place.

Christ offered Himself a sweet fragrance, to offer us to God the Father; By that He wiped away the animosity that closely prevailed between man and the Creator, resulting from the disobedience of Adam, the first man, to the law of the great God; and took away the authority of sin that enslaved us all, we who in the old, kept on crying out to God: *"Turn Yourself to me; and have mercy on me"* (Psalm 25: 16)].

According to St. Jacob El-Serougi: {After, together with His Father, gave the law to Moses on the mountain, Christ came to consummate the ordinance; He came to be circumcised to let no one be offended by His incarnation; He came with the sacrifice, to prove that He is one of us. …….

Mary carried the Receiver of all, together with His offering, to bring forth the sacrifice to the altar of the sanctuary, according to the law; Joseph carried the birds, and came for the sake of the babe; to the sanctuary to present his offering].

According to St. Ambrose:
[That is the meaning of what was written: "*You shall set apart to the Lord all that open the womb"* (Exodus 13: 12). The words of the law were a symbol of the fruition of the virgin's womb, truly holy with no blemish, a fact confirmed by the words of the angel, saying: *"The Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God"* (Luke 1: 35). The virgin did not conceive by a human seed, but by the Holy Spirit, who dwelt in her and sanctified her. And the Lord Jesus is the only One, completely Holy, among those born by women …….. .

But, how could we call every male holy, when we see many of them evil?! …… Was Ahab, for example holy?! Of course not!.....; But behold, we have now the One, by whom, alone, it would be possible for the holy virgin church, to give birth to people for God, with an open womb, and to an inheritance without blemish; He is the only One who was delivered by a virgin].

Therefore, presenting her firstborn, holy to the Lord, the virgin presented Him, for whose sake the law made every one who opens the womb holy, as His symbol.

5-THE HYMN OF PRAISE, SUNG BY SIMON THE ELDER:

According the church tradition, Simon the elder, was one of the 72 Jewish elders, chosen by Ptolomy to translate the Torat to the Greek language, known as 'the Septuagint version'. It was said that while doing the task, when he had the intention to change the word 'virgin' in Isaiah's prophecy "*Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son ……..."* (Isaiah 7: 14) with the word 'girl, because he had some reservation on the former term; the angel of the Lord came to confirm to him that he will not die before he sees that actually taking place. …… Now carrying the babe Jesus on his arms, and the Holy Spirit told him that he is the One, his tongue opened to praise God, longing to set forth from this world, after seeing by the Spirit the salvation of all peoples and nations.

The events of the nativity have actually presented to us a joyful portrait of God's friendship with all: Behold, a poor virgin conceives and gives birth; a Symbol of the Church that enjoys the spiritual virginity through her unity with the virgin Groom, to give birth to spiritually virgin children; ……A barren old woman gives birth; ……A mute priest sings a hymn of praise; ……A

fetus leaps for joy in his mother's womb; ……An old widow (Anna) glorifies God; …….And Simon the righteous elder, who anticipated the comfort of Israel, is led by the Holy Spirit to carry His heavenly friend on his arms.

'Simon', whose name means (he who listens) or (he who hears), probably refers to the obedient believers, who, for so long, anticipated the fulfillment of the prophecies, and the enjoyment of the "*the desire of all nations"* (Haggai 2: 7); and, once they were led by the Holy Spirit into the temple, and carried the Lord on their arms, they genuinely longed to depart from this world, after their hearts found comfort concerning the salvation of the peoples, and the proclamation of God's glory among the nations.

+ If a woman with the flow of blood was instantly healed by just touching the hem of the Lord's garment, how much more benefit would Simon the elder get, by carrying him on his arms, to exult for joy?!

  Simon is carrying the babe who came to set the captives free from the bonds of the flesh. Knowing for sure, that no one could bring him out of the prison of the body, together with a promise of an eternal life, other than this babe on his arms; he addressed his talk to Him, saying: *"Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word, for my eyes have seen Your salvation"* (29, 30);…….. These words concern, not only Simon, but all mankind who anticipated Him.

+ Simon did not enter into the temple by a mere chance, but was actually led by the Holy Spirit……. You, as well, in case you intend to take on yourself the Lord Christ, to carry Him on your arms, and to be qualified to depart out of the prison of the flesh, you should strive to be led by the Holy Spirit into the house of God, where Jesus is, into the church, in the altar set by living stones.

  (The scholar Origen)

+ Simon surely confirmed an evidence, and carried a testimony that the servants of God, always have peace, freedom, and comfort. Once we retreat from the tempests of this world, and reach the haven of our eternal city; ……Once death is realized, we would reach eternity.

  (Cyprian the martyr)

+ Simon is liberated from the bondage of the body; the snare is broken, and the bird is set free.

  (St. Gregory, Bishop of Nyssa)

+ Now, carrying the divine infant on his arms to present Him before God, Simon perceived that he, actually is not the one who present the infant, but the other way round; Namely Simon is the one presented to God by him. For the son is not to be presented to his father by the servant, but it is the son who present the servant to the father……He who depart in peace is actually presented as an offering to the Lord.

  (St. (Mar) Ephraim the Syrian)

+ The Lord Jesus was then brought forth into the temple as a suckling babe. And once Simon the blessed elder saw him, he took Him on his arms, and blessed the lord saying:

  "**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, a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel"** (29 – 32).

  The secret of redemption was from the old, before the foundation of the world, but was not proclaimed except at the fulfillment of time, to become a light to those dwelling in the darkness; those who were possessed by the strong hand of the devil; who worship the creature and not the Creator (Romans 1: 25); who worshipped the dragon, the source of sin

and iniquity; who obeyed the unclean devilish hosts, and worshipped them the way the One God should be worshipped…… In spite of all that, God called those peoples to the light of His true Son; saying on the mouth of the prophet: "*I will whistle for them and gather them, for I will redeem them; and they shall increase as they once increased; I will saw them among the peoples; and they shall remember me in far countries"* (Zechariah 10: 8). Yes indeed, those who were lost were a great multitude, yet God called them, received, and redeemed them, and as a guarantee for peace, they have got the grace of adoption by Jesus Christ.

The pure apostles were sown among the peoples; with the result that all those who were far from the divine throne, were brought close; that Paul the apostle sent to them an epistle, saying: "*……. But now in Christ Jesus, you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ"* (Ephesians 2: 13); and by their approach to Christ, those peoples will be glorified by Him, according to the promise of God the Father.

And He says: "*So I will strengthen them in the Lord, and they shall walk up and down in His name, says the Lord"* (Zechariah 10: 12); and concerning this the blessed psalmist also says: "*They walk, O lord, in the light of Your countenance; In Your name they rejoice all day long; and in Your righteousness they are exalted"* (Psalm 89: 15, 16); And the prophet Jeremiah supplicates to the Lord, saying: "*O Lord, my strength and my fortress; my refuge in the day of affliction; The Gentiles shall come to You from the ends of the earth, and say, 'Surely, our fathers have inherited lies, worthlessness, and unprofitable things"* (Jeremiah 16: 19).

Christ, therefore, was Light and Glory to Israel; and even though some Jews lost the way, were ignorant of the holy books, and denied Christ, yet some of them have been saved, and were glorified by Jesus, having on their heads the holy apostles, who, by their light, they illuminated the lamp of the gospel to the ends of the earth.

Christ, as well, glorified Israel; on account of that, to them, He belongs in the flesh, even though "*He is over all, the eternally blessed God"* (Romans 9: 5).

(St. Cyril the Great)

In the praise uttered by Simon the elder, the following are noticed:

(1)He proclaims the collectiveness of salvation and the Catholicism of the church. If His people Israel, from whom Jesus Christ is incarnated, and among whom He dwelt, have been glorified; and if some Jews received faith in Him -- the twelve apostles in particular;

But "the new Israel" embraced members from all peoples; for he proclaimed that the arms of God are open wide by the practical love on

the cross for the sake of all the Gentiles; saying: "*For my eyes have seen Your salvation, which You have prepared before the face of all*

peoples; a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles" (30, 31).

Such a spiritual look has been joyfully adopted by the Church; being said:

+ He who gathers all in Him, was hanged on a tree.

+ Having been lost to us through a tree, by the tree, as well, He was proclaimed to all, showing Himself, the height, the length, the breadth, and the depth. And as we are told by one of the early fathers, Through spreading His hands, He reunited the two peoples in God; His two hands refer to two peoples spread all over the earth; and one head, refers to One God.

(St. Erinaos)

+ The cross is the way to bond the entire world together.

(St. Gregory, Bishop of Nyssa)

+ The cross is the ladder of Jacob;
This tree with its heavenly dimensions, raised from the earth to heaven, has set itself an eternal plantation between heaven and earth; to raise the world up.
And to embrace together different kinds of human natures.

(St. Hypolitus)

If the church, in her gladness with the angelic hymn of praise (*Glory to God in the highest* ……) came to sing it every morning;……..In her gladness with the hymn of praise, sung by Simon the elder: (*Lord, You are letting Your servant depart in peace* ……), came to sing it in the midnight praise, as well as in that before going to sleep..

(2) Hearing this hymn of praise, Mary and Joseph marveled, that what was proclaimed to them by God, came to be clearly proclaimed to
Simon the elder, as well.

"***Then Simon blessed them and said to St. Mary: 'Behold, this child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against"*** (34)

If God the Father has sent His only begotten Son for the salvation of the world (John 3: 16) through the sign of the cross; yet, not all the people of Israel have accepted this sign, nor responded to God's exalted love; but some opposed and were offended by it. On another aspect, the fall and rising of many, refer to the fall of what is evil in our life, for the sake of the rising of the kingdom of heaven in us; for it is the work of the Lord Christ to destroy the old man to set the new one in his place; to uproot the thorns, to sow in us the tree of life.

This view concerning the fall and rising of many in Israel; namely the fall of the deniers, and the rising of the believers; …….the fall of evil in us to raise the righteousness of God inside us instead, was clear in the writing of the fathers:

+ "*For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing"* (2 Corinthians 2: 15). He says that among those who are saved and those who are perishing, the gospel continues its befitting work. Even though the light is counted as darkness for the blind, yet it is still light; and even though honey tastes bitter in the mouth of the sick, yet it is still sweet by nature……..So is the gospel, with its sweet fragrance. Even if some perish, because of not believing in it; it would not be the cause of their perdition, but it is their going astray …… By the Savior, many will fall, and many will rise; and yet, He remains the Savior and the Healer, even if tens of thousands perish …….

(St. John Chrysostom)

+ Behold, Simon in his turn prophesies that our Lord Jesus Christ came for the fall and rising of many, when He deals with the work of the wicked and the righteous, and, as a true and just Judge, He gives each according to his works, whether by torment or by life.

(St. Ambrose)

+ I believe that the Lord came for the fall and rising of many, not only because some fall and others rise; but because He lets what is evil in us fall, to set what is better in its plce. His coming is for the destruction of the evil desires, and for setting the features of the good soul; as according to the apostle Paul: "*For when I am weak, then I am strong"* (2

Corinthians 12: 10). In the same person there are what is weak and what is strong; he may be weak in flesh, but strong in the spirit.

Whoever rises, his sin falls and dies; while he lives in righteousness; that is what we get from the graces pertaining to our belief in Christ.

Let what is evil in us fall, to give the chance to what is better to rise! For if adultery does not fall in us, purity will not rise; and if what is contrary to reason in us is not destroyed, our mind will not reach perfection. That is the meaning of "*for the fall and rising of many".*

(St. Basil the Great)

The Lord Christ is therefore *"the chief Cornerstone, laid in Zion by the Father, elect, precious; and he who believes in Him will by no means be put to shame"* (1 Peter 2: 6); if it falls on the nonbeliever, it will crush him to powder, and if he falls on it, he will be bruised (Luke 20: 28). Such precious Stone is proclaimed in our inner Zion, to destroy every corruption, and to crush every evil in us, to set instead the inner building of Christ in uprightness and righteousness.

Being the Stone that is not set on the wrong foundation; it is "*for the fall and rising of many".*

Whenever we speak of the Lord Christ, we speak of Him as being "The Crucified"; hence Simon the elder goes on saying: "*For a sign which will be spoken against";* which, according to St. Basil the Great, and to St. Cyril the Great: [this sign refers to the cross]; and according to the apostle Paul: "*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 Corinthians 1: 18). So you can see that, while the sign of the cross is foolishness to some, it is mercy and life to others.

Again, according to St. Basil the Great, the sign, opposed by the heretics, is the truth of "The incarnation of Christ", for some of them claimed that it is no more than a heavenly body, by which they deny the truth of the incarnation of Christ, the same the Gnostics did; Some others said it is a body that existed since before the time began, while still others said that Christ's existence began with Mary; by which they denied His Godhead.

(3)If the Lord Christ who came for the salvation of the world, was the object of oppression, St. Mary, as well, partook of the cross together

with her Son, being a representative of the Church that bears the image of her oppressed Groom ……. The Evangelist says:

"*Yes, a sword will pierce your own soul also, that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed"* (35)

According to St. Cyril the Great:[By the sword is meant the severe pain that came upon Mary, seeing her Son crucified, when she still had no knowledge that her Son was stronger than death, and will certainly rise from the dead. It was the same with the disciples who had no knowledge of this fact; for if the disciple Thomas has not put his hand in the side of the Lord after His resurrection, and felt the places of the nails in his body, he would not have believed that His Lord resurrected from the dead]. In the end prayer of the ninth hour it came: [When the mother saw the Lamb and Shepherd, the Savior of the World, hung on the cross, she said while weeping: "The world rejoices in receiving salvation, while my heart burns as I look at Your crucifixion which You are enduring for the sake of all, my Son, and my God"].

St. Ambrose gives us another concept of the sword that pierced the soul of St. Mary, that it is "the Word of God"; which is befitting of us to receive in our depths as a two-edged sword (Hebrew 4: 12), to separate evil, to fall, from good, to rise…….. [There is no indication in the Holy Book nor in history that St. Mary was martyred; and the material sword, which does not pierce the spirit

but the body, is *"the Word of God, which is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit"* (Hebrew 4: 12)].

(4)What does he mean by saying: "*that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed"* (35)? If the sword -- whether it is the physical pain, or the Word of God – pierces the soul of St. Mary, will expose the thoughts and heart of many, like the scribes and the Pharisees, who pretend to keep the law, and to have zeal on the statutes; for, before God's work with St. Mary, their inner truth will be exposed, and their vain hypocrisy will be revealed.

1- THE HYMN OF PRAISE OF ANNA DAUGHTER OF PHANOEL:

As all categories had to rejoice in that amazing child, the Evangelist Luke presents to us the widow as a prophetess who praises the Lord; as though on behalf of all widows. If Simon the elder used to come to the temple as a priest to minister in his shift; that widow "*did not depart from the temple for about 84 years, but served God with fasting and prayers night and day"* (37). Once she saw the babe, she "stood" despite her very old age of about 100 years, and "*spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem".* Her mouth set forth to praise, and her mouth opened to prophesy.

When writing to the widow 'Furia', St. Jerome presented Anna to her as a living example, saying: [If you wish to know how widows should be, read the gospel according to Luke, who talked about the prophetess Anna of the tribe of Asher. 'Anna' meaning (grace or compassion of God) 'Phanoel' meaning (the face of God), and 'Asher' may be translated as (riches) or (blessing); who since her youth endured widowhood for as long as 84 years, did not depart from the temple, and worshipped God with fasting and prayers night and day; hence she has got grace spiritually, was worthy of being called 'the daughter of God's face', and enjoyed a portion in the 'riches and the blessing', belonging to Him.

2- THE RETURN TO NAZARETH:

"So when they have performed all things according to the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own city, Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him" (39, 40)

If the conception with the Lord Christ and his birth have brought joy to heaven and earth: the heavenly creatures exulted and set forth to the earth to bless it; humans rejoiced, like the simple shepherds; the wise man like the Magi; priests like Zecharias and Simon the elder; married women like Elizabeth; virgins like Mary; widows like Anna daughter of Phanoel; and children like John the Baptist, etc. …… Yet, after being taken into the temple at the age of 40 days, he returned to Nazareth in complete anonymity to practice the human life like anyone of us. According to St. John Chrysostom: [He did not intend to perform miracles in his childhood and youth, until He started His ministry at His thirty years of age, in order to practice our life, and to proclaim the truth of emptying Himself …….. That is confirmed by the Evangelist John who proclaimed that turning the water to wine in the wedding of Cana of Galilee, was the first miracle performed by Jesus (John 3).

Despite the fact that He never separated from His Godhead, He bore our manhood, to become like us, it is written: "*The Child grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon Him"* (40). The following are commentaries of some fathers on this phrase, and on the one saying: "*And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men"* (52):

+ As saying that the child grew in wisdom, stature, and grace, refers to His human nature, I wish you ponder in the depth of the theory of redemption; how God the Word took upon Himself to be born as mam, even though, by His divine nature, has no beginning; nor is limited by time; How the perfect God, consented to submit to the law of human growth; and to grow in wisdom, even though He is God of wisdom; How the Rich became poor; the exalted became lowly; how

God the Word emptied Himself through His consent to have the human nature. ……..God the Word, once He was born, could have chosen to become a grown-up man, with all body members and tissues; but in such a case, it would seem as fantasy. Hence, the child, according to the laws of human nature, chose to grow in wisdom, stature, and grace.

Therefore, do not get offended in case you are asked by someone: [How could God progress and grow? And how could God, who grants grace to the angels and men, be given wisdom and grace?!

To clarify this amazing secret, I wish you ponder in the phrases that came in the gospel; for the wise Evangelist, by the two mentioned verses, did not refer to the Word, namely to the Divine Nature, but, with no confusion nor vagueness, referred to "Christ", born as a man from a woman, took our image, and became a human child. Hence the Evangelist said that "*He grew in wisdom, stature, and grace".* Therefore you see that the body of the child grew according to the laws of nature; and that His mind progressed with the physical growth.

The human body grew in stature; the soul progressed in wisdom. But concerning God, He is perfect in His divine nature; for He is the source of wisdom and perfection.

(St. Cyril the Great)

+ The words of the gospel clearly show that the growth and progress of our Lord, concern His manhood and not His Godhead.

(St. Gregory, bishop of Nyssa)

+ Godhead dwelt in a human body, and in a human soul as well …… "*He emptied Himself and took the form of a bond servant"* (Philippians 2: 7); And by the same ability to empty Himself, He also "grew"; …….. He took upon Himself a weak body, but could, as well, grew stronger; …….. He grew in wisdom, and even taught the elders in the temple while He was still a child……
(The scholar Origen)

+ The text adds: "***But His mother kept all those things in her heart"*** (51).
Mary, knowing that, in her Son, there were things that surpassed what concern the natural man, she kept everything in her heart; ……. She watched Him as He grew stronger in wisdom, stature, and grace before God and men ……..
(The scholar Origen)

The progress here concerns the body; ……As **a babe**, He was carried to the temple; As **a child**, He remained in the temple and debated the law with the priests; And as **a Man,** the Word proclaimed itself in Him; Hence St. Peter, then all the rest of the disciples confessed, saying: "*You are the Son of God*" (Matthew 16: 16; 27: 54).

The growth of wisdom here, does not mean the growth of Wisdom itself, but the progress of manhood in wisdom (by proclaiming it) …… Hence it is said: "*Wisdom built her house"* (Proverbs 19: 1); and gave to itrself growth of her house.

3- JESUS IN THE TEMPLE:

The gospels did not tell us, about the Person of the Lord Christ, after returning from Egypt, while probably three years of age, until He started His ministry in His 30 years of age, other than the episode of His entrance into the temple in His 12 years of age; a unique episode that revealed to us the first words uttered by the Lord Christ, concerning His mission, in the gospels, saying to His parents: "*Did you not know that I must be about My Father's business?"* (49); and also revealed how He was obedient and submissive to His parents. In this episode, the following are noticed:

(1)According to the law, all Jewish men had to go to Jerusalem every year to celebrate the Feast of the Passover (Exodus 13: 17; Deuteronomy 16: 16); there, to remain eight days, to cover both the Passover and the Feast of the unleavened bread together. The travelers to, and from Jerusalem, used to go in two caravans: one ahead for women and another at the rear for men; the little children used to go with the men or with the women. That is why, when the first day of the return journey passed, and the two caravans mixed together, Joseph and Mary, came to inquire about the whereabouts of the boy, each thinking that he was with the other, they spent a full day inquiring about Him among all men and women of the caravans; and when they realized that He was nowhere to be found, they decided to go back to Jerusalem where they spent a third day. Hence the Evangelist says: "*After three days they found Him in the temple, sitting in the midst of of the teachers, both listening to them, and asking them questions"* (46)

We know nothing about the talk of the 12 years old Lord Christ to the teachers in the temple, but we are told by the Evangelist that

"***All who heard Him were astonished at His understanding and answers"*** **(**47);

and that St. Mary and St. Joseph "***when they saw Him they were amazed"*** (48).

He could have been talking to the teachers concerning the true Passover, to reveal to them the need to set forth from the symbolic to the true Passover lamb; ……or concerning the "crossover", not from Egypt to Canaan, but from hell to paradise; ……or concerning the need for the Messiah, and revealing the prophesies…….. Anyway, talking to them with authority, all who heard Him were astonished. But "*His mother kept all things in her heart"* (51)

The Evangelist said that they found Him after three days sitting in the temple in the midst of the teachers (46). The figure 3, as we saw in our study of the book of Joshua, refers to faith in the Holy Trinity; as well as to the resurrection of the Messiah from the dead. It is not possible for the Church to encounter her Groom in His holy Temple except through the Trinitarian faith;……. through getting in touch with the work of the Holy Trinity in her life; ……and through the experience of the resurrected life together with the Messiah. In other words, we cannot encounter with the Lord in His sanctuaries, to enjoy His exalted friendship, unless we get sanctified by the Trinitarian faith, and live by His life resurrected in us.

If we practically receive the Trinitarian faith, enjoyed the sonhood to God the Father; if our hearts open to the redemption of the Son; and we got the fellowship of the Holy Spirit; …….if we have got the heavenly life, resurrected in Christ, we shall see the Lord Himself in our hearts, as He is in His temple, leading all our inner debates; teaching and training us as a Teacher with authority; guiding our hearts with all their emotions, our thoughts, with all their dimensions; and our bodies with all their feelings! We shall, together with His mother St. Mary, watch Him, and be astonished together with her, for the sake of His work in us!

(2)Commenting on how St. Mary and St. Joseph searched for the child Jesus, the scholar Origen said: [I shall not find Jesus among the
relatives and acquaintances according to the flesh; …….I shall not find my Jesus among the multitudes.

You should know where Jesus was found, Take Mary and Joseph with you to find Him. According to the Evangelist, they only found Him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers listening to them and asking them. You, as well, search for Jesus in the temple of God; search for Him in the Church; search for Him among the teachers who never depart from the temple; there you will find Him. …… But in case someone claims to have the talent to teach, without having Jesus, he will be a teacher, only by name …….. According the Evangelist, we shall find Jesus among the true teachers.

As the Lord Jesus was, sometimes asking questions, and sometimes answering questions, and was great in both cases; Let us supplicate to Him to listen and to respond to our prayers.

Let us anxiously search for Him; for it is written: "*His mother said t Him: Look: Your father and I have sought for You anxiously"* (48); Let us not search for Him slothfully, carelessly, and hesitantly, as some do, who will never find Him.]

He also says: [I do not think they were anxious for fear that He would probably be lost or died; as it was not possible for Mary to have such doubts; knowing how he was conceived in her by the Holy Spirit, enunciated by the angel, worshipped by the shepherds, and carried by Simon the elder; And it was not possible for Joseph to have the same doubts, knowing how he was commanded by the angel to take the infant and flee to Egypt; and heard the words: "*Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit"* (Matthew 1: 20). Joseph would never fear for the safety of the child, being sure that He is the 'Word', the Son of God ……. The anxiety of His parents had therefore, another significance that the regular reader would not be able to understand. …… They were anxious to think that He would probably go away from them to someplace else; or ascended to heaven, to come down again in proper time!

You, as well, If it so happens, some day, that you lost the Son of God, search for Him first in the temple ……. Hasten to the temple, for there, you will find Jesus, the Word, and the Wisdom; namely, "the Son of God"].

(3)Commenting on the words of St. Mary to her Son, saying: "*Look, Your father and I ……",* St. Augustine says: [Despite the great honor

she has got by the incarnation of the Word of God in her womb, she, with the spirit of humility, mentioned Joseph ahead of her, saying: "*Your father and I'.* Although she knew that Jesus is not conceived by Joseph's seed, yet, through the spiritual love that filled the holy family, she counted him as His father, and mentioned his name ahead of hers.

(4)The first words uttered by the Lord concerning His divine mission, as it came in the holy gospels, were: "*Why did you seek Me? Did you*

not know that I must be about My Father's business?"(49). Those words reveal the nature of the Lord Christ, His mission, as well as, they teach us the following fitting behavior:

a- On the aspect of the nature of the Lord Christ; Even though He did not object to be referred to Mary and Joseph, as His parents; when His mother said to Him: "***Son, why have You done this to us? Look, Your father and I have sought You anxiously?"*** (48); For Joseph was His father according to the law because of adoption, albeit not of his seed; and Mary was His mother according to the flesh; ……But, being the Son of the Most High in Heaven, He confirms His relation to Him by saying: "***I must be about My Father's business"*** (49).

Manhhod-wise He is referred to Mary because she gave birth to Him, and took His body from her; but He is not physically referred

to Joseph, except on account of his caring for Him, and his loving bond to Mary; being said:

+ The gospel gave the title "***His parents"*** (41) to Mary because she gave birth to Him, and to Joseph because He cared for Him.

(The scholar Origen)

+ The way Mary was called a mother to the disciple John in love, and not because she gave birth to him; so Joseph was called a father to Jesus, because he cared for Him and raised Him.

(St. Cyril of Jerusalem)

+ Because of the spiritual faithfulness, the two of them were worthy to be called “Jesus’ parents”; according to the mind and to the goal, and not to the flesh. The two of them were called “His parents) according to His humility, and not to His exaltation; according to His weakness (Manhood), and not according to His (Godhead).

(St. Augustine)

+ But saying to His mother: “***I must be about My Father’s business”*** (49) Jesus refers to His tru Father, and reveals His Divinity.

(St. Cyril the Great)

+ There are two sonhoods for Jesus: one to God the Father, and the other to Mary His mother; The first divine, and the

second because He condescended to be one of us by being born from Mary

(St. Ambrose)

b- According to experts in education and psychology, the words of the Lord here, saying: “*Why did you seek me? Did you not know that I must be about My Father’s business?”,* portrayed a kind of a new (revolt) in the world of childhood. …….. For even though Jesus was ***“subject to them”*** (51), a sign of complete obedience to His parents, yet, according to St. Ambrose: [Was it possible for the Teacher of virtue not to give them their due as His parents? ……He was actually subject to them , not out of weakness, but of love]. That was how that unique child gave children a living role model of obedience to their parents …… St. Jerome wrote to the nun ‘Ostichum’: [Obey your parents, yet filled with your (divine) Groom]. And according to the scholar Origen: [Let us, my children learn to obey our parents …….. for the child Jesus so did, and became a role model to all children, or to their guardians in case they are orphans ……. If Jesus, the Son of God was subject to Mary and Joseph, shall I not be subject to my Bishop whom God ordained a spiritual father for me? …… Shall I not be subject to the priest chosen by God?].

If the Lord Christ gave a practical lesson and a living example for the submission and obedience to parents; Yet, by His words, saying: “*Why did you seek Me? Did you not know that I must be about My Father’s business?’,* He proclaimed that it is the right for a child or a young man, to walk, in his mission, according to his own talents and possibilities; and not to be just an irrational tool in the hands of his parents. On another aspect, it would be befitting of the parents to deal with their child, not as a mere extension of their life, and to conforms him according to their own wish and hope, but to let him or her have his or her own talents and possibilities ……. They should deal with him as a person with his own personal independent identity; and not just their follower.

The religious or the civil laws and statutes which were prevailing in those days, even the Jewish ones, did not give childhood the right for life, as a free human; but some of them, even gave the right to the parents, to kill their child, or to offer him a burnt offering to pagan gods, as the worshippers of Molok or Mollukh used to do…… Now the Lord came to proclaim that the child has the right to practice his life according to what suit his person, talents, and possibilities ……. I shall postpone dealing with this issue for a special research, which will be published in a book entitled “The familial love”, if God allows us to live to do it.

(5)Commenting on the phrase said by the Evangelist Luke: “***But they (Mary and Joseph) did not understand the statement which He***

spoke to them. Then He (Jesus) went down with them to Nazareth” (50, 51), the scholar Origen said: [They did not understand the

significance of the words said by Jesus: “***I must be about My Father’s business”,*** namely to be in My father’s house – the temple].

Jesus’ house is up high; and as Mary and Joseph, still, have not reached the perfection of faith, they could not soar together with Him up

high; hence the Holy Book says: "*He went **down** with them"* (51)…….. As Jesus often did with His disciples, together with whom He went

down, and did not perpetually remain on the mountain…….].

Finally, we end our talk about the Lord Christ in the temple, by the words sent by St. Jerome to to 'Laeta' concerning the way she should

raise her daughter 'Paula':

[Let her grow together with her groom in wisdom and stature before God and men (2: 52)! ……Let her go, together with her parents to

the temple of her true Father; and not go with them out of it……..Let them seek her in the ways of the world, among the crowd and the

relatives, where they will not find her, but will find her in the sanctuary (the temple) of the Holy Book; askijng the prophets and the

apostles about the concepts of the spiritual matrimony, for which she is dedicated].

==========

CHAPTER 3

PROCLAMATION OF THE HEAVENLY FRIEND

Before talking to us about the work of that heavenly Friend, particularly with the rejected and despised categories of men, He talks to us here about the nature of this Friend, proclaiming it through His forerunner "John the Baptist"; and through the testimony of heaven itself (the Baptism).

1-	The appearance of John the Baptist	1 - 6
2-	An exhortation to repentance	7 - 14
3-	John's testimony concerning Christ	15 - 20
4-	The baptism of the Lord by John the Baptist	21 - 22
5-	The genealogy of the Lord Christ	23 – 27

1- THE APPEARANCE OF JOHN THE BAPTIST:

Owing to the importance of the role played by John the Baptist, which made men of the Old Covenant prophesy him; the Evangelist Luke talks to us about the date of his appearance as a fact that actually happened; his work, its impact; and his testimony to the Lord Christ.

As to the date of his appearance, he says: "***Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar; Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea; Herod being a tetrarch of Galilee; his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and the region of Trachonitis; and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene; While Annas and Caiaphas were high priests, the Word of God came to John the son of Zecharias in the wilderness"*** (1, 2)

In giving the good news of conceiving him, the Divine Inspiration fixed its date by stating the name of the king of Judea, where the episode took place (1: 5); but at the beginning of his appearance, it stated the name of the Roman Emperor, the Roman governor, three rulers, each of whom was a tetrarch (For Judea was divided into four sections), and the names of two high priests …… Among all those civil and religious rulers, no one was found worthy of the Word of God to come upon him, except for John the Baptist who was raised in the wilderness.

Mentioning all those names was probably to show the extent of humiliation reached by Israel. For it was not only governed by the Roman Emperor, but the kingdom of Israel was divided into four sections ruled by Roman kings; and even the high priests were appointed by the Roman governor. That bitter humiliation was one of the signs of the coming of Christ; for it is written: "*The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh comes"* (Genesis 49: 10).

In the midst of such a dark atmosphere, John the Baptist appeared to prepare the way for the Lord Christ; as according to St. Ambrose: [The voice appeared to prepare the way for the Word]. Commenting on the words of the Evangelist Luke: "*The Word of God came to John the son of Zecharias in the wilderness"* St. Ambrose says: [The Word of God, namely the Lord Christ has been secretly working in John while being in the wilderness, before working in His church that was like a barren wilderness, before He planted in it holy trees, He brought forth from among the peoples; ……..she was barren, then came to have children (Isaiah 54: 1).

We can say that while the Roman were in control of everything in Judea, even concerning the religious issues (the Roman governor fired the high priest Annans and appointed Caiaphas in his place); God, on the other hand was planning for them what is greater; not to destroy the Roman kingdom, and to raise up the kingdom of Israel from a temporal humiliation, but He was, in a secret way, preparing John in the midst of the wilderness, to pave the way for Israel and for the Romans as well to receive fellowship in the Holy Body of Christ; to bind them together in the One Head on an exalted level, for the sake of the limitless eternity.

Life may happen to become pitch dark before your face, and you may think that evil has prevailed and destroyed the believers; but, in every era, God works in the midst of the barren wilderness, to turn it into a holy paradise, that embraces trees from every nation, people, and tongue.

Concerning the region of John's work and its nature, he says: "***He went to all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins"*** (3) The essence of his mission was 'Baptism', bound to repentance. By his Baptism, John came to prepare the way for the Baptism by the Lord Christ, not only for the remission of sins, but for the enjoyment of the spirit of sonhood to God, and the dwelling of the Holy Spirit in us, to let us enjoy friendship with the Lord on the level of the true unity and the fellowship of His glories.

That work of John the Baptist was not fulfilled haphazardly, but came as a part of God's salvation plan; which was seen by the prophets from afar, who spoke of, ***"As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, saying: 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord; Make His path straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill brought low; the crooked places shall be made straight, and the rough ways smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God" (4-6).***

(1) If the Lord Christ is "the Word of God", John is just the "voice" that prepares the way for "the Word". If the Lord Christ is "the Truth" itself, John is a "voice of one crying in the wilderness" to receive the Truth through "the ways" or the "straight paths". He is calling the despaired souls, which are like the low valleys that will be filled with hope, and the haughty souls like a mountain or a hill brought low …….. By that all will enjoy salvation.

By "the valleys" he probably also means the nations, destroyed by paganism, that made them lose every hope in the Lord. And by "the mountains and the hills, he means "the peoples of Israel and Judah", that became haughty and arrogant. The call is addressed to all ……. "*all flesh shall see the salvation of God".*

(2) John's voice called for practical penitence and behavior "*the crooked places shall be made straight, and the rough was smooth".* It was a call to forsake every crooked way, for no one will see salvation while remaining in his evil ways and in his crooked life.

(3) The word "flesh" here, came in the Greek origin as "body". According to St. Augustine: [The Holy Book used to call the human nature as "everybody"], and [He does not mean a body without soul or mind, but by saying "everybody" he means "every man"].

(4) John's call is still active in every soul; for our depths shall not see the salvation of God, unless we hear the voice of John inside us, filling our contrite hearts with hope, destroying every haughtiness and pride; turning our inner feelings away from the crooked ways; and making our deep rough ways smooth!

(5) As the gospel according to Luke was addressed to the Greeks in particular, he quoted here the words of the prophet Isaiah that open the gates of hope before all the Gentiles, saying: "*all flesh shall see the salvation of God",*

Commenting on this, St. Cyril the Great says:

[All flesh saw the salvation of God the Father, for He sent His Son a Redeemer and a Savior; not to a specific people in particular; not only the children of Israel. The expression "all flesh" means peoples of the entire world; for the mercy of the Savior is without limits; He redeemed all nations, and His light came upon all those who live in the darkness. That is what the psalmist meant by saying: "*All nations whom You have made, shall come and worship before You, O Lord"* (Psalm 86: 9); while, at the same time, the remnant of the people of Israel will be saved, according to the words of Moses, saying: "*Rejoice, O Gentiles with His people"* Deuteronomy 32: 43)].

2- AN EXHORTATION TO REPENTANCE:

"*Then he said the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him: 'Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore, bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin 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 fruits is cut down and thrown into the fire'"* (7 – 9).

In this text the following is noticed:

a- Coming out in such great number for baptism, did not bring joy to the heart of John the Baptist, nor he counted it as success of his ministry; for it should have been bound to practical repentance according to true faith. In Christianity, as well, Baptism is bound to practical faith; When a child is presented for Baptism, his god-father or god-mother (in most cases the parents), pledge to raise the child in the practical and true faith.

In the essays written by St. Cyril the Great to the Catechumen, he said: [Did you enter because the guard let you in……Are you not aware of the wedding garment to partake of the banquet?! ……..Now, get out, and come again tomorrow when you are more prepared]. ……Yes indeed, all are invited without discrimination, and the voice of the apostles cries out loud to gather all; but the Groom Himself will search those who seek to enter with Him in a symbolic matrimonial relationship. Oh! How I wish no one of those whose names were registered, would hear His words, saying: "*Friend, how did you come in here without a wedding garment?"* (Matthew 22: 12).

b- He called them “brood of vipers”, saying: “***”Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”*** (7)

He took this analogy from the habitat where he was raised, the wilderness in which the vipers abound.
He probably refers here to their Love of doing harm to others; for the viper is poisonous and deadly to man.

+ By these words he refers to the popular view that the Jews, known for their evil hearts like poison, loved the crooked paths and hidden pits of vipers, instead of the knowledge of the secrets of God. Yet, the words: “*Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come”* refer to the mercy of God that granted them a chance to repent their sins; By that he tried to tell them ahead, with complete faithfulness, about the horrible judgment to come.

  By “brood of vipers”, John means the Jews as a race and not as individuals; who are described as being as “*wise as serpents”* (Matthew 10: 16). they were granted the natural wisdom, but used it for their own benefit, not thinking about forsaking their sins.

  (St. Ambrose)

+ He properly called them “brood of vipers”; for it is said that those kind of people are “*murderers of fathers, and murderers of mothers”* (1 Timothy 1: 9); and slayers of their teachers by their own hands.

  (St. John Chrysostom)

c- He asks them not to trust only in being descendants of Abraham, saying: “***Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father’”*** (8); For it is befitting of them to bear the sonhood to Abraham through practical work as true children, following his lead in faith and behavior; “***For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones”*** (8). God actually so did, and will keep on doing, for in the old covenant, he brought forth from Sarah’s barren, stone-like womb, Isaac and his uncountable descendants, children to Abraham.

+ He warned them against boasting their noble race; for birth does not give any privilege, unless justified by the inheritance of faith.

+ God was and still is ready to soften the hardness of our hearts, to turn the stones into a faithful people.

  (St. Ambrose)

+ What will be the use of ancestry, if the children do not walk on the path of honor and nobility like their ancestors?!; Hence the Savior says: “*If you are Abraham’s children, you would do the works of Abraham”* (John 8: 39).. God intends for such a relationship to be based upon ethics and works; for it would be worthless to boast of the holy and good ancestors when you cannot reach their example of goodness and virtue…….

+ John probably calls those nations ‘stones’, for, on account of not knowing Christ as God, they worshipped the creation and not the Creator. ……..But Christ ultimately called them, they responded to His call, and became children to Abraham, and, by their faith in Jesus Christ, they confessed His Divinity.

  (St. Cyril the Great)

+ Saying that “*God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones”*, he refers here, as well, to the Gentiles, being like stones because of the hardness of their hearts, about whom He proclaimed on the tongue of His prophet Ezekiel: “*I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and give them a heart of flesh”* (Ezekiel 11: 19). For the “stone” is a symbol of hardness, while “flesh” is a symbol of compassion.

  (St. Jerome)

d- Now, using the way of threatening punishment, he says:

“***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”*** **(9)**

+ Let us liken the fruitful trees; …….Let our apparent virtues be supported by the hidden roots of persistent humility; ……..Let us rise above the earthly behavior, and bear at the top the fruitful works of repentance; lest the ax would come to cut off the wild branch (the fruitless); For “*Woe is me if I do not preach”* (1 Corinthians 9: 17); So said the apostle; but I personally say; [Woe is me if I do not weep on my sins; …..Woe is me if I, at

midnight, do not rise to give thanks to you, because of Your righteous judgments" (Psalm 119: 62); …….Woe is me if I falsely testify against my neighbor; ……Woe is me If I do not utter the truth].

"*The ax is laid to the root of the tree";* I wish it grows and produce the fruit of repentance and thanksgiving.

Behold, the Lord is coming to gather the fruits and to grant life; …….He discovered the tree that did not give fruit for the last three years (Luke 13: 7). He found no fruition of the Jews; ……..I wish He will find fruition in us; for He intends to cut off the fruitless trees, which use up the ground in vain

Let those without fruition, strive to have fruition in the future, for the good keeper of the land interceded for us, fruitless and worthless, to give us another chance. And God suffers long on us, hoping that we may eventually produce some fruition.

(St. Ambrose)

\+ The ax refers to the indignation and wrath of God on the Jews, because of their great crime and oppression against Christ; about which the prophet Zechariah says: "*In that day there will be a great mourning in Jerusalem, like the mourning at Hadad Rimmon in the plain of Magiddo"* (Zechariah 12: 11); And the prophet Jeremiah says to Jerusalem: "*The Lord, who called your name 'Green Olive Tree', lovely and of good fruit, with the noise of a great tumult, He has kindled fire on it, and its branches are broken"* (Jeremiah 11:16)……..You may, as well, add to this the parable of the fruitless fig tree in the holy gospels, which the Lord allowed for its roots to dry up.

Notice how St. John the Baptist did not say that the ax was laid to the 'stem' of the tree, but to its 'root'; by which it is evident that, even though the branches withered and fell down, yet God did not cut the tree from its roots, because there were a few remnant of the people of Israel who, having repented to God, were saved, and did not eternally perish.

(St. Cyril the Great)

According to St. Jerome: [What is this ax laid to the root of the tree to cut it off and throw into the fire, but, the two-edged sword, "the Word of God" that cuts off everything fruitless in us; strong, active, and able to destroy in us everything barren, to set in us instead, by the precious blood, living fruition.

e- Having threatened to cut off the fruitless tree from its root, and to throw it into the fire, John the Baptist showed that the fruition is (the practical love) or (the mercy);

"*So the people asked him, saying: 'What shall we do then?'. He answered and said to them: 'He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise"* (10, 11).

He was also asked the same question by tax- collectors and soldiers; to whom his response concentrated in mercy, and practical love; counseling the tax-collectors not to forsake their jobs, but not to abuse them by collecting more taxes to their own account; and counseled the soldiers not to forsake their jobs, but not to abuse them by oppressing people, not to testify falsely against anyone, but work faithfully, and only seek their wages.

\+ John the Baptist gave one and the same answer, yet as befitting to every particular situation.

Mercy is a general virtue; and the main principle according to which everything should be done by men of every professions and age; including tax-collectors and soldiers, and even farmhands; rich and poor. All are called to give those who have none; for mercy is the mother of all virtues.

(St. Ambrose)

3- JOHN'S TESTIMONY CONCERNING CHRIST:

The Jews were a strange kind of people; While rejecting the Lord Christ, and not being able to accept Him a Savior and a Redeemer, we see them think of John that he is "the Christ"; for according to the gospel:

"***Now, as the people were in expectation,, and all reasoned in their hearts about John, whether he is the Christ or not ….”*** (15);

The reason for this is what they saw in John of intense asceticism in his food, drink, and attire, and of his very strong rebuke to the sinners, which led them to think that such a person could be the one to save them from the Romans, if he has the proper leading role.

How strange is man; who often rejects the exalted love of God, despises His longsuffering, and is drawn to the creature rather than to the Creator! …… But, in his faithfulness, refusing to rob the glory of Christ, and strongly rejecting the exaggerated and unbefitting honor given to him; John the Baptist testified to the true Christ; and proclaimed that there is no way to compare between the Lord Christ and him; between the baptism of the Lord and his baptism;

"***John answered, saying to all, 'I indeed baptize you with water, but One mightier than I is coming, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather the wheat into His barn, but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire”*** (16, 17).

According to St. John Chrysostom: [That is what expected of the faithful servant; not only to refuse to refer the honor of His Master to himself, but to hate it when it is given to him by many].

And according to the scholar Origen: [Even though he was worthy of admiration and love of everyone. And his life was unique and different from anyone else; yet they have gone beyond the reasonable limit in their admiration, to wonder whether he was the anticipated Christ …… For fear that such kind of out-of-place, non-spiritual love, the apostle Paul said: "…….*But I refrain, lest anyone should think of me above what he sees me to be or hears from me. And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of revelations ……”* (2 Corinthians 12: 6, 7) ……I, myself (St. John Chrysostom), suffer from such exaggeration in our church; for the majority love me more than I deserve, and commend my talks and teachings; even though some, on the contrary, criticize my sermons, and refer to me certain views that are not mine…….. Those who exaggerate in loving me, and those who do in hating me, do not keep the law of the truth; …….. Hence, we should set proper measures for our sentiments, and not let them carry us along here and there……. As it came in the book of Ecclesiastes: "*Do not be overly righteous, nor be overly wise; Why should you destroy yourself?”* (Ecclesiastes 6: 16)…….. You should not love someone, or even some angel, with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind; but follow the words of the Lord, and keep His teaching: "*To love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul; with all your strength, and with all your mind”* (Luke 10: 27)].

According to St. Ambrose [By such a comparison, John did not mean to prove that Christ is greater than him; for there is no point in doing such a comparison between the Son of God and any man……..Not intending to compare himself to Christ, John said: "*His sandal straps, I am not worthy to loose"; ……..*Saying: "*He must increase, and I must decrease”* (John 3: 30), was a prophecy that the Jewish people had to (decrease), so that the Christian people (increase)].

According to St. Cyril the Great: [People were so amazed to see such a super-natural example in the simple life of John the Baptist, the greatness of his ethics, and the exaltation of his godliness and goodness, to think that he must be Christ, to whom the law with all its symbols referred, and many prophets and apostles described. But John, hastening to scatter their thoughts with the utmost firmness, proclaimed that he is no more than a servant of his Master; and that the glory, honor, and worship are only befitting to be given to Christ, whose name is above all names.

Knowing that Christ is faithful for all who serve Him, John had to proclaim the truth, that the difference is extreme between him as a servant and Christ as the Lord; he said: "*You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before Him”* (John 3: 28). …….. John was indeed great in his message, and in his testimony; superb in its splendor like the morning star that directly precedes the sun rise from beyond the horizon.

To prove to the multitudes that he is far below his Lord in level and prestige, John said to them: "*I indeed baptize you with water, but One mightier than I is coming, whose sandal straps I am not worthy to loose"(Luke 3: 16)*…… For, if the heavenly hosts, the thrones, and the holy Seraphim stand around the divine throne of Christ, to give Him glory and praise, Who, among the inhabitants of the earth cam dare to approach Him?!. Yes, indeed, God loves man, has compassion and mercy toward him; but we, being ignorant human beings, should never deny that we are nothing compared to Him].

According to St. John Chrysostom: [God is so exalted above me that I am not worthy to be counted as the least of his servants, who loose His sandals, which is the meanest of tasks].

Providing us with a symbolic interpretation of the words uttered by St. John the Baptist; St. Gregory the Great sees in the sandals of the Lord a reference to the body with which He is clothed ; and in loosing its straps, a reference to loosing the secrets of the incarnation; feeling that he, himself, is unable to perceive and search that divine secret

While St. Jerome provides us with another interpretation, that John the Baptist does not dare to stretch his hand to loose the straps of the sandals of His Lord, on account of that the Lord intends to take His widowed bride, and would never reject her. …….. In the law it came that the closest relative of the widow who refuses to take her as his wife to set from her children for the dead; will have to take off his sandals before the city elders, and give them to whoever accept to marry her, as it happened in the episode of Ruth (Ruth 4: 7, 8). But our Christ will not take off his sandals to give to anyone; for He intends to acquire us as His bride, and to purchase us by His love and given blood.

Finding no point of comparison between him and his Lord; nor between his baptism and that of the Lord, St. John the Baptist said: "*I indeed baptize you with water,…… But He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire"* (16).

+ Water purifies the body, but the Spirit purifies the heart from sins. We do the first task, and pray for the second to be consummated, when the Spirit blows on the water to sanctify it. Water alone is not enough to purify, even though the two (Water and Spirit) do not separate; that is why the baptism of repentance which includes only one element, done by John differed from the baptism of grace that includes the two elements together, as was done by the Lord Christ. ……. If both the body and the spirit are partners in sin, purification would be imperative for both of them.

(St.. Ambrose)

+ Baptism is the great furnace full of fire, in which men are refined to be immortal.

(St. Jacob El-Serougi)

+ As it came in the book of Acts, the Spirit is fire, having dwelt upon the believers in the form of tongues of fire; fulfilling the words uttered by the savior, saying: "*I came to send fire on the earth, and how I wish it is already kindled"* (Luke 12: 49).

There is another interpretation, which is that we are now baptized with the Spirit, then, in the great day of the Lord, according to the apostle, "*Each one's work …… will be revealed by fire; the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is"*(1 Corinthians 3: 13).

(St. Jerome)

+ To further prove his weakness and ignorance, John says again: "*I indeed baptize you with water; …….. But He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire"* (16); a great proof of the Divinity of Christ; for it is within His power to grant men the Holy Spirit, so that whoever receives Him will enjoy the divine nature. …… But you should notice that this power in Jesus Christ is His, not given to Him by anyone; as it is said: "*He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit". ……*.As the incarnate Word is the Fruit of the Father; therefore no one should protest that He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit is God the Word, and not that who came from the seed of David; ……. For those who divide Christ into two, according to the Holy Book, are: "*sensual persons who cause divisions, not having the Spirit"* (Jude: 19):".

Here, we must firmly and strongly confirm that God the Word, grants the Holy Spirit, who is His, to whoever is worthy of this great Gift. …….When God the Word incarnated, He granted us the Holy Spirit; for He is the only begotten Son of God, He and the Father are One in a way unperceivable by the human mind. John the Baptist says: "*I am not worthy to loose the straps of His sandals";* then adds: "*He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire".* ….. It is , obvious here, that there are two feet to put on sandals; and no one with reason can assume that Christ, before His incarnation wore sandals; that only happened after His incarnation. ……. Yet Christ, by His incarnation, did not cease to be God, He could do works befitting of His Divinity, like granting the Holy Spirit to all those who believed in Him; on account of that He, at the same time was God and Man.

(St. Cyril the Great)

Proclaiming the Baptism of the Savior, the Evangelist talked of Him as a Judge, saying:

"***His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather the wheat into His barn, but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire"*** (17)

+ The reference to the "winnowing fan" of the Lord Christ reveals His authority to discern the work of each of us. When the wheat is winnowed, the empty are separated from the full; the fruitful from the fruitless, by a breath of air …… In the day of judgment, the Lord will discern between the works fruitful with virtues, and those empty of them; and will call the perfect to the heavenly home ……. Hating the chaff and despising the barren works, "*a fire goes before Him"* (Psalm 97: 3); a fire of a certain kind that consumes the works of the darkness, and intensifies the shine of the works of the light]

(St. Ambrose)

+ I wish to reveal the reason why our Lord holds the winnow fan in His hand; and concerning the breath of air that causes the chaff to fly away here and there; while the heavier wheat grains remain in their place

  The "air" I believe, refers to some temptations that reveal whether the believers are chaff or wheat. For, whenever some temptations dwell on your soul, it is not the temptation itself that makes chaff or wheat out of you; but it will reveal your hidden nature; if you are light chaff without faith. On the contrary, if you confront the temptation with courage, the temptation will (reveal) the virtue of perseverance and power hidden in you.

+ When a tempest blows it will not be able to shake the building built on the rock; but will reveal the weakness of that built on the sand.

(The scholar Origen)

+ The way John likens the inhabitants on the earth to wheat on a threshing floor, was a fact shown by our Lord Christ addressing His holy disciples, when he said to them: "*The harvest truly is great, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest"* (Luke 10: 2). ……You will find out that we, the inhabitants on the earth are likened to heads of wheat and to a harvest, a harvest on which the God of all reigns. But meditate in the words uttered by John the Baptist, describing the threshing floor as belonging to Christ, who cleans it up, gathers the wheat to His barn, and throws the chaff into the unquenchable fire. …… The wheat symbolize the good men who held fast to their faith and their dogma; whereas the chaff symbolize the weak in mind and sick in heart, who will be scattered by the wind of temptations…….. No wonder, that the wheat is then gathered to His barn, for it is worthy of being kept in a place secured by God's care, and mercy; while the chaff is to be consumed by an unquenchable fire, for they are worth nothing.

(St. Cyril the great)

+ The presence of chaff will not harm the wheat of the Lord; who although, comparatively few , yet they however are a multitude.

(St. Augustine)

The Evangelist Luke concentrated on the main work of John the Baptist, which is his testimony to the Lord Christ, to His salvation work, and to His baptism with the Holy Spirit. This testimony, although, they came with some words of rebuke for repentance, yet they also gave the spirit of hope, preaching the mercy of God; saying:

"***And with many other exhortations he preached to the people"*** (18)

John's preaching and sermons were not only addressed to the commons, but extended to the rulers with no reservation nor compliments.

"***But Herod the tetrarch, being rebuked by him concerning Herodias, his brother Philips wife, and for all the evils which Herod has done, also added this, that he shut John up in prison"*** (19, 20)

We have previously referred to how Herod, by putting in prison, intended to shut up the breath of the truth, and to shackle the Word and the commandment by chains and sword; but the voice of truth got higher through tribulation. And we also referred to how that became a symbol of the attempt of the Jews to shackle the prophetic word (the prophet John), to keep him from proclaiming the Messiah.

4- THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD BY JOHN THE BAPTIST:

"***When the people were baptized, it came to pass that Jesus also was baptized; and while He prayed, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended in bodily form like a dove upon Him; and a voice came from heaven which said: 'You are My beloved Son; in You I am pleased"*** (21, 22).

The following are some comments by the father on the baptism of the Lord:

+ The Lord came to be baptized, completely without sin; but not without the Holy Spirit. And about His servant and forerunner John, it was written that he was filled by the Holy Spirit while still a fetus in his mother's womb (Luke 1: 15); …… If John, who was born by human seed from his father, received the Holy Spirit while being conformed in the womb, how about the Lord Christ Himself, who was conceived, not by the physical way, but by the Holy Spirit?!

(St. Augustine)

+ The Holy Spirit did not come upon the multitude of Jews, but only upon Jesus……. If you, O Jew, want to receive the Holy Spirit, believe in Jesus, in whom the Holy Spirit dwells.

(St. Jerome)

+ Christ is born; and the Spirit was His forerunner;
He is baptized; and the Spirit testifies to Him;
He is tempted; and the Spirit leads Him (4: I, 18)
He performs miracles; and the Spirit accompanies them.
He ascends to heaven; and the Holy Spirit replaces him!

(St. Gregory the Nezianzen)

+ The Lord was baptized, not to be purified by the water ……. For He who knew no sin, has the authority to purify; by which whoever is buried in the font of Christ, in it he will leave his sins.

+ By saying to John: "*Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness"* (Matthew 3: 15), the Lord, Himself, explained the reason of His baptism……. Among His multitude of His mercies, is building the Church; After the fathers and the prophets, the only begotten Son of God descended to earth, and came to be baptized. …….Here, the divine fact mentioned, concerning the Church, clearly shows itself, which is: "*Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it; and unless the Lord guards the city, the watchman stays awake in vain"* (Psalm 127: 1)…… I shall even dare to say that man cannot walk along a way, unless the Lord leads him; according to what is written: "*You shall walk after the Lord your God and fear Him"* (Deuteronomy 13: 4); and: "*God leads the steps of man"* (Wisdom)……. Now, by saying: "*Permit it to be so now, to fulfill all righteousness",* the Church is created

+ Christ, having washed Himself for our sake; or He rather washed us in His body; It is therefore befitting of us to hasten to wash up our sins.

+ Alone He was buried, yet He raised us all;

Alone He descended, to lift us up all;

Alone He carried the sins of the whole world, to purify all in His Person. According to the apostle: "*Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts"* (James 4: 8); Christ who needs no purification purified Himself for our sake.

(St. Ambrose)

+ Was Christ in need of being baptized? What benefit came upon him by practicing this statute? Christ, the Word of God, The Holy from Holy, as described in the praises said by the Seraphim (Isaiah 6: 3); and as described by the law in more than one location; by which all the prophets conform with Moses.

And what would be our benefit from having the holy baptism? ……No doubt to cleanse our sins. ……But Christ had none of these, about whom it was said: "*Who committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth"* (1 Peter b2: 22). Who, being Holy with no evil nor defilement, was *"separated from sinners, and has become higher than the heavens"* (Hebrews 7: 26).

But someone of weak faith may ask: [Was "God the Word" baptized? And was Christ in need of the gift of the Holy Spirit? No, nothing of the sort! ……..Christ was baptized to teach us that Jesus of the seed of David, united with God the Son, was baptized and received the Holy Spirit. …….. Why would you divide the indivisible into two sons, and say that when He was baptized in His thirty years of age, he became holy?!

Was Christ not holy until He reached thirty years of his age?! ……Who will consent with such a claim with which you clothe the truth with vanity?! ……..As "*There is One Lord: Jesus Christ*" (1 Corinthians 5: 6), we openly and loudly declare that He did not separate from His Spirit when He was baptized; Even though the Holy Spirit, proceeds from the Father, yet He also belongs to the Son, for: "*Of His fullness we have all received"* (John 1: 16); …….And the Holy Spirit was often called "the Spirit of Christ", , even though He proceeds from God the Father, according to the words of the apostle Paul: "*Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out: Abba Father"* (Galatians 4: 6).

Therefore, even though the Holy Spirit proceeds from God the Father, yet Christ the Word, the only begotten true Son of God, who partakes of the greatness and authority with the Father, sends the Holy Spirit to the creation, and grants them

to all, who are worthy of Having Him, saying: "*All the things that the Father has are Mine; Therefore I said that He will take of Mine and declare it to you"* (John 16- 15/.

God the Word, our firstborn in everything, and our model in all things, having emptied Himself by His humility, and taken up our image and likeness in order to teach us the value of baptism, and what it implies of grace and power, He Himself was baptized, and when He was baptized He prayed, to teach us, beloved brethren, that prayer is always necessary for whoever was worthy of the grace of the holy baptism.

The Evangelist John describes heaven as being opened, as though it was before closed; "*Christ said: ….. You shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man"* (John 1: 51); For the hosts of angels in heaven, and men on earth, being all shadowed by one banner, and all submitting to One Shepherd – the Lord Christ, heaven opened, man was joined by the angels; and the Holy Spirit descended, proclaiming that there is now a new creation. He first dwelt upon the Lord Christ who received Him, not for His own sake, but for our sake, we humans; for we by and in Him, get grace upon grace.

You see that Christ for His love of our salvation and redemption, endured having our image, which implies being emptied of His divine nature! …….How could He empty Himself, unless He accepts to endure the human nature?!

Now, as we take Christ as our Role Model, let us therefore, approach the grace of the holy baptism; by which we dare to pray fervently, raising holy hands to God the Father, to open for us the windows of heaven.

(St. Cyril the Great)

+ They seemed to our understanding as separate; but they actually are inseparable Trinity.

(St. Augustine)

+ Let us now contemplate in the secret of the Trinitarian. While we say that God is One; yet we confess the Father and the Son …….He who proclaimed: "*I am not alone, for the Father is with Me"* (John 16:32) ….. together with the Holy Spirit The Holy Trinity will never separate.

(St. Ambrose)

5- THE GENEALOGY OF THE LORD CHRIST:

In our study of the gospel according to Matthew (the First Chapter) we compared between the genealogy of the Lord Christ, as it came in the gospel according to Matthew, with what came in the gospel according to Luke. We shall, therefore, give here only a summary of that comparison plus showing some other aspects:

(1) Matthew, as a Jew writing to His Jewish brethren, cared to show the Lord Christ as being "The Son of David", the anticipated King Messiah, and the son of Abraham, by whom the divine promises and covenants were fulfilled. Luke on the other hand, writing to the Gentiles, cared to show Him as the Father of all humanity.

(2) We said that, while presenting the genealogy to us before the events of Nativity took place, when the Word of God emptied Himself by incarnation, Matthew gave it (**going down**) from Abraham to Joseph betrothed to Mary; While in the gospel according to Luke, in which the genealogy came after the Baptism of the Lord, by which He raised us up to the sonhood to God, the Evangelist gave the genealogy (**going up)** from Joseph to Adam (the son of God).

According to the scholar Origen: [While Matthew started the genealogy from Abraham to reach the point of saying: "*Now the birth of Jesus was as follows"* , on account of that he cares and rejoices in Him who came to the world …… Luke, on the other hand, going up, and not down, with the genealogy, as he speaking about the Baptism of the Lord, he raises us up to God Himself].

And according to St. Ambrose: [Luke, not bringing forth the genealogy until after the divine Baptism, intending to show that, by Baptism, God is the Father of us all; confirming that Christ, according to His genealogy, came from God (the Father), a Son to the Father by nature, grace, and flesh (having come as a descendant of Adam the son of God). confirms the divine sonhood by the testimony of the Father, Himself, saying: "*You are My beloved Son; in You, I am well pleased"* (22)].

For the same reason we find that the Evangelist Matthew, repeating the word "*begot*"; saying for example: "*Abraham begot Isaac",* while the Evangelist Luke repeats the words "*the son of*", in every case …… While the former proclaims that

sin came down to us through the human births; and that the Lord who is without sin carries the sins of all the generations. Luke, on the other hand raises us up to reach the “sonhood to God”.

(3) The differences in the names mentioned in the two gospels could be explained by that one of the evangelists used the natural genealogy according to the flesh, while the other used it according to the law. As it was the case when someone dies childless, his widow is given in marriage to her closest relative, and the first child is referred to the dead according to the law; and is, therefore, referred to two fathers: one of whom is his father according to nature, and the other according to the law

According to St. Ambrose, the Evangelist Matthew presented the genealogy on Solomon’s side, whereas Luke presented it on that of Nathan. The former intended to confirm the Lord’s royalty; while the later, intended to confirm His priesthood; for He is A King by the kings, and a Priest by the priests; Yet His royalty is divine, and His priesthood is exalted. ……. The ox became the symbol of the Evangelist Luke, for speaking much about priesthood.

(4) According to the scholar Origen, Matthew included in his genealogy, the names of certain sinful and Gentiles women; on account of that the Lord Christ, having come to carry our sins, would not shy away from being referred to anyone. Whereas Luke, having mentioned the genealogy after baptism, refrained from including the names of sinful women, with the intention of raising all above the level of weakness.

We spoke before about how God intends for (men and women) to be “men”, not (sex-wise), but spiritually and mature, without the softness of women or the weakness of children.

(5) According to the Evangelist Luke, saying: “***Jesus began His ministry at about thirty years of age, being (as it was supposed) the son of Joseph, the son of Heli”*** (23), brings our memory back to Joseph the son of Jacob, who, when he reached the same age (30 years) (Genesis 12: 2), was released from prison, and became the second in command to Pharaoh, and his deputy over the storehouses of wheat, to distribute it during the seven years of famine; …….. The Lord Christ, having the keys of the storehouses of the spiritual wheat, namely, the words of the law and the writings of the prophets, flows upon His hungry disciples to satisfy them spiritually by the new wheat free of the old yeast.

==========

THE SECOND DIVISION

OUR FRIEND WAS TEMPTED JUST LIKE US

CHAPTER 4

OUR FRIEND IS TEMPTED JUST LIKE US

While the last three chapters, represent "**The new book of Genesis**"; as the incarnate Word of God dwelt in the womb of the virgin as a fetus, then, after birth, to become a child, then a young man, to bless the childhood and youth; and by granting a new creation to all humanity; the fourth chapter represents "**The new book of Exodus**", not for the people, to set forth anew into the wilderness for 40 years; but for the Lord, to enter into it by Himself to be tempted, and to grant the conquest to His people. …… In the old, the people perished in the wilderness because of continuous falls; but now, the Lord, by His temptations, presented to us strength and salvation

1-	Jesus' temptation in the wilderness	1 - 13
2-	Jesus in Galilee	14 - 15
3-	Jesus rejected by His own	16 - 30
4-	Jesus working with authority	31 - 37
5-	Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law	38 - 41
6-	Jesus preaching in the synagogues of Galilee	42 – 44

1- JESUS' TEMPTATION IN THE WILDERNESS:

In the three previous chapters, we saw our heavenly Friend condescend to partake of everything concerning us: He became a fetus in the womb like us; submitted to the law; set forth with the multitudes to be baptized by John; and being without sin to confess, He carried us as a new creation to enjoy sonhood to God the Father, and to carry in itself His Holy Spirit. The glories proclaimed in the River Jordan of glories, were to our account, and in our name; in which we came to get back our first nature, to have again the right to enjoy the lost paradise, and to encounter the Father in the daring of sonhood.

Now, having become like us, to confirm this friendship on the level of work, the Lord Christ set forth, by the Spirit, into the wilderness to be tempted for 40 days …….. Instead of setting forth into the wilderness, bearing the spirit of continuous grumbling, like the old Israel, the Lord carried us in His body into the wilderness, by His victorious nature.

+ Come now, let us praise the Lord; … Let us sing the songs of joy to God our Savior; …. Let us trample on the devil underneath our feet; …..Let us exult celebrating the fall of the devil into humiliation and shame; ……Let us address him with the words of the prophet Jeremiah, saying: "*How the hammer of the whole earth has been cut apart and broken!....You have been found and also caught, because you have contended against the Lord"* (Jeremiah 50: 23, 24).

  From the old, and before the coming of Christ, the Savior of the whole world, Satan our great enemy kept thinking of iniquity, flowing of evil, scoffing the weakness of the human nature, and crying out: "*My hand has found like a nest, the riches of the people; and as one gathers eggs that are left, I have gathered all the earth; and there was no one who moved his wing, nor opened his mouth with even a peep"* Isaiah 10: 14).

To say the truth, no one dared to challenge the devil but the Son of Man Jesus Christ, who, in our image, strongly struggled against him, hence the human nature conquered (as I have already shown) in Jesus Christ, and got the crown of victory and conquest. From the old, the Son of Man, through His prophets addresses the devil, our bitter enemy by the famous phrase: "*Behold, I am against you, O destroying mountain, who destroys all the earth"* (Jeremiah 51: 25)/

Now, let us see how the Evangelist describes Jesus Christ fighting on our behalf against the destroyer of the whole earth:

"Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan, and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness" (1).

See the human nature in Christ, anointed by the grace of the Holy Spirit, and crowned by honor and reverence, according to the promise of God, saying: "*I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh"* (Joel 2: 28); a prophecy first fulfilled in Jesus Christ; on account of that God did not grant His Spirit in the old to men, who were weak in minds and souls; for He says: "*My Spirit shall not strive in man forever, for he is indeed flesh"* (Genesis 6: 3).. But, now, in Christ, there is a new creation which is sanctified by water and Spirit, to become, no more the children of flesh and blood, but of God the Father, to have the grace of adoption, that by such fatherly compassion we became fellows in the divine nature.

No wonder, therefore, for our firstborn to be the first to receive the Holy Spirit, even though He is the Grantor of the Holy Spirit, to us, being His beloved brethren; to which the apostle Paul referred by saying: "*For both He who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified are all of one; for which reason He is not shamed to call them brethren, saying: 'I will declare Your name to My brethren'"* (Hebrew 2: 12)

Hence, the Evangelist says that "*Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan"* (1)……. Now, I wish you would not pervert from the truth, and would not become dismayed to hear that Christ the Word, have been sanctified, but rather think of the wisdom of redemption and salvation; that Christ incarnated, to partake of our manhood in order to make us grow in His riches, and to honor us by His greatness; For Christ partook of everything in us except for sin.

(St. Cyril the Great)

+ The goal of Jesus Christ's fast and retreat, was to heal us from the covetousness of evil desires. For the sake of all, He accepted to be tempted by the devil, to teach us how we would conquer him in Him.

+ Christ came to be baptized, "*to become all things to all men"* (1 Corinthians 9:22); submitted to the law, and circumcised that He might win those who are under the law; and partook of the food of those who are without the law, that He might win those without the law; …….For the weak He became weak by the passion He endured in His body; ……He rejoiced with those who rejoice, and wept with those who weep (Romans 12:15); ……was generous with the rich, and a prisoner to the poor ; ……. got thirsty with the Samaritan woman (John 4: 7); and hungry in the wilderness (Matthew 4: 6), that, by His fasting, to atone for the fall of the first Adam, because of his desire for food; While Adam got full of the knowledge of good and evil for our harm; Christ got hungry for our benefit.

(St. Ambrose)

Jesus, being filled with the Holy Spirit ……. was led by the Spirit into the wilderness; being tempted for forty days by the devil. And in those days He ate nothing; and afterward when they had ended, He was hungry" (1, 2)

+ Christ was led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness, namely spiritually; He fasted, namely did not give His body its necessary needs. Someone may wonder: [What is wrong if Christ perpetually dwelt in the cities?!;…….. What was the benefit of dwelling in the wilderness, when He was in no need for goodness?! ……Why did Christ fast when He was in no need for fasting?!. ……..Such virtues were set for us to overcome our evil desires, and to have control over the emotions which kindle the wicked desires in us. …….Was Christ in need for fasting, by which God the Father killed the sin in the body; that, according to the apostle Paul:, "*For what the law could not do, for that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh on account of sin. He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit"* (Romans 8: 3, 4).

Christ then condemned sin in the flesh, and wiped out the iniquity which reigned upon the human nature for a long time! While being Holy and pure by His nature, with no reproach, no change, no shadow of hypocrisy, and lacking nothing, Christ practiced fasting……. Why did He fast?, Why did He retreat from dwelling in the cities, to dwell in the wilderness, and to endured the labor of fasting? ……He has done such great things to teach us, beloved brethren. Christ drew the plan according to which we should behave, and paved for us a straight way to walk along; the way walked by the holy congregation of monks. For, otherwise, how would they come to love the life in the wilderness, have benefit from the life of

seclusion, and see in it salvation for their souls and peace for their spirits? ……..Monks forsake the world to distance themselves from its turbulent waves and violent storms; and to free themselves from the chaos, disturbance, arrogance and evil desires; or according to the blessed Joseph, "to take off what is on them to give back to the world its possessions". Referring to those who used to live together with Christ< the apostle Paul says: "*Those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires"* (Galatians 5: 24); and adds to that saying that such a life of asceticism has to be followed, with fasting, endurance, despise of luxurious food; by which they could conquer the devil.

But notice that Christ was first baptized, was filled with the Holy Spirit, then went to dwell in the wilderness, and used fasting as a weapon by which to fight the devil and his hosts. He did all that to teach us, to follow His lead. ……. You have first to put on the helmet of God, girdle yourselves with the shield of faith, and hold the scepter of salvation. …….You have first to be provided with a power from high above, through the holy baptism, by which you can walk an honorable life with the great God; then by spiritual courage you may go into the wilderness and live in seclusion away from men; and practice a holy fast to conquer the evil desires of the body and to overcome the devil if he intends to tempt you……. In Christ, then, we find every weapon we need. He will be among the warriors, where the conquerors are crowened with the crown of victory and conquest. Now, let us contemplate in how Christ wrestled against the devil; how "*He fasted 40 days, and when they have ended, He was hungry"?*

How could Christ become hungry, He who satisfies us with the fat of His grace?! …… Is He not "the heavenly Bread" which came down from heaven?..... "*Christ fasted, and became hungry";* for He, intending to be like us, had to endure what a human may endure.

(St. Cyril the Great)

\+ [He presents to us a comparison between the temptation of the first Adam in paradise, and the temptation of the second Adam in the wilderness; …….to let us contemplate in how the first Adam was driven out of paradise; and to know how the second Adam came back from the wilderness to paradise; and to contemplate in how the reform was done and in what order.

Adam was created from (the virgin) land; and Christ was born by a (virgin girl).
Adam was created in the image of God; while Christ is Himself the image of God.
Adam had authority upon all the irrational creation; while Christ has authority on everything.
Eve had a shaken personality; while the holy Virgin was characterized with wisdom.
The tree in the first instance brought forth death; while the tree in the second (the cross), brought forth life.
Adam was in paradise; while Christ was in the wilderness, but came to bring back the condemned, to paradise.

As God would never retreat from His verdict, death had to come upon one, instead of the other.

Who is the shepherd who can help us against the snares of this life, and the deceptions of the devil, to strive, "*not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places"* (Ephesians 6: 12)…… Shall God send an angel; when some of them have fallen?! …….. Shall He send "*one of the seraphim like the one who came down in the midst of people of unclean lips"* (Isaiah 6: 6), he who purged the lips of just one prophet with a live coal?..... We are committed to search for another shepherd of a different caliber for us all to follow. …….. Who is that great Shepherd who can provide goodness to all, except Him who is high above all?1……. Who can lift me up above this world except Him who is above the world?1 …… Who is that great Shepherd who can lead both men and women, the circumcised and the uncircumcised, the Barbarian and the Scythian (Colossians 3: 11); the slave and the free; but Him who is All in All.?!

There is a multitude of snares wherever we go; snares of the flesh; of the literality of the law; those set by the devil on the wing of the temple and on the top of the mountain; of the philosophies; of the evil desires, "for the adulterous eye is a snare for the sinner"; of the love of the world; of hypocrisy in religion; of the life of purity (the despise of the sacrament of matrimony) ; etc.……...Yet, the best way to destroy all those snares is to set a bait for the devil, so that, once he comes upon his prey, the snare would close shut on him; then we can say: "*They have dug a pit before me; into the midst of it they themselves have fallen"* (Psalm 57: 6) What could this bait be but the "body" …….The Lord has taken over Himself the body of our humility and weakness, to give the enemy the bait to fight Him, and be defeated.

Now, Christ is in the wilderness of this world to lead man, to teach him, to train him, to conform him, and to anoint him with the holy anointment. Once He finds him strong, He will lead him to the fertile pastures …….. Finally, He leads him to the garden during His passion; as it is written: "*When Jesus has spoken these words, he went out with His disciples to the "Mount of Olives" where there was a garden, which He and His disciples entered"* (John 18: 1)……. Finally, bringing man back by the power of the Lord, confirms to us the fact shown by Luke, by the words addressed by the Lord to the robber crucified on His right hand: "*Today, you will be with Me in paradise"* (Luke 23: 44).

+ Jesus returned filled with the Holy Spirit, to the wilderness, to challenge the devil; for unless He was tempted by the devil, He would not conquer for my sake in a secret way; to set Adam free from captivity.

(St. Ambrose)

+ "***He was led by the Spirit into the wilderness"*** (1);

He was undoubtedly led by the Holy Spirit, not as someone committed to do, or as a captive; but He longed to go to the battle to wrestle and to conquer.

(St. Jerome)

+ Jesus, our Leader, allowed for Himself to be tempted, to teach His children how to fight.

(St. Augustine)

a- The temptation of the bread:

Entering into the battle on our behalf, in our name, and to our account, to conquer, the temptation against the Lord Christ started by that of the bread; when the devil sought from Him to turn the stones into bread to satisfy His hunger.

On one aspect, this temptation was somewhat similar to that of the first Adam who fell into disobedience through eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil ……. But here, the Lord came fasting to resist the devil and to conquer him, refusing to listen to him, despite His ability to turn the stones into bread, the way He turned water into wine in the wedding of Cana of Galilee (John 2: 1-11). And on another aspect, that temptation was allowed by the Lord to expose the deceitful fatherhood of the devil for the sinners; for the true fathe, if his son asks him for bread, would not give him a stone, according to the saying by the Lord Christ in (Luke 11: 11).

I wish we reject every stone the devil presents to us to eat as bread, to make us grow hard of heart, with no compassion nor love.

According to the scholar Origen: [The stone presented by the enemy is the heresies, he presents as deceptive bread, and make us think of as the satisfactory Word of God].

"***And the devil said to Him: If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread. But Jesus answere him, saying: 'It is written: man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God'"*** (3, 4)

+ The devil jumped to where Christ was, looked at a stone, and said to Christ: "*If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread'.* Here, you may see the devil approaches Christ the way he approaches some man, or some saint; yet he had some doubt concerning the Divinity of Christ. ……. To make sure, he knew that it is impossible to change the nature of matter to another opposite to it in essence, except by a divine power. Now if it so happens that Christ changes the stone into bread, the devil will be greatly confused; but if He fails to do it, then the devil would rejoice; for he would find before him, a weak human being whom he can oppress.

Knowing what goes on in the mind of the devil, the Lord Christ did not change the stone into bread, nor proclaimed His inability to do. But rebuked the devil by saying: "*Man shall not live by bread alone"* (5).

By that He meant that, if given power from God, man can even live without food, as it so happened with Moses and Elijah. Moreover, Christ could fast 40 days, and did not turn stones into bread. To confuse the devil, he Lord did not say that He cannot do it, nor that He could, to make the devil leave Him alone; By that Christ intended to teach us a further lesson..

Notice, beloved brethren how the nature of Christ was contrary to the covetousness of Adam; who by eating we were defeated, while by the asceticism of Christ we were victorious.

While the body subsists upon the fat of the earth; the rational soul feeds upon the eternal Word of God. The bread provided by the earth will feed the body, created from the same elements as those of the earthly bread. The heavenly bread, on the other hand, sent by God from above, will feed the soul of men, as it does for the angels.

(St. Cyril the Great)

+ This temptation reveals that the devil has three arrows to inflict wounds on the heart of man: the desire for food, the desire for vain glory, and the covetousness!! …… My conquest in Christ started where I was defeated by the devil in Adam.

  The devil says: "*If you are the Son of God"*. The devil knew that the Son will eventually come; but he never imagined that he would come in such weakness; that is why, he intended to make sure by tempting Him.

  Now notice the weapons by which Christ conquered the devil for your sake and not for His own. Even though He is able to change the nature of elements (like what He did in the wedding of Cana of Galilee); He intended to teach us not to obey the devil in anything, not even to show off our strength; and to know by this temptation, the deceptive cleverness of the devil; in that he sometimes tempts man to make sure of a certain fact about him. ……..If the Lord chose to use His divine authority as God, we would not have got the benefit we had; but He used the general possibility, namely the use of the Words of God.

  (St.Ambrose)

+ "*Command this stone",* ……..The deceitful Satan presents a stone instead of bread (Luke 11: 11), he wishes it to be done, so that men would grow, not on the bread but on the stone he presents in the form of bread. I believe that Satan still shows us the stone and say to us: "Command this stone to become bread"…….. If you see the heretics feed on their false teachings as bread, you should know that their debates and teachings are "the stone", shown by Satan to eat as bread….

  Let us therefore watch, let us not eat the stones of Satan, thinking that we are eating the bread of the Lord.

  (The scholar Origen)

+ Be sure that the enemy attacks the heart through filling the stomach up.

  (Father John of Cronstadt)

b- The temptation of "No Cross":

In the last temptation, the Lord refused to turn the stone into bread, presenting Himself as *"The Living Bread which comes down from heaven"* to satisfy His believers. …… Now, knowing that the anticipated Meesiah will reign forever through the cross and the passion, the devil showed the Lord all the kingdoms of the world to seduce Him to reign, not through the cross, but through the easy way, and the wide door; which is (worshipping the devil himself).

Through strongly rejecting that wide way, Christ opened for us the door to reign together with Him, through His passion, and not through evil.

+ The Son of God, as well as the antichrist, both intend to reign; Yet the antichrist intends to reign to destroy those who belong to him; whereas Christ reigns to save those who belong to Him by the cross. …….. Whoever, among us is faithful, will have Christ reign on him by His word, wisdom, justice, and truth. But, in case we prefer the evil desire over God, sin will reign on us, according to the warning of the apostle: "*Do not let sin reign in your mortal body"* (Romans 6: 12).

  There are two kings intending to reign: sin, namely the devil on the wicked, and justice, namely Christ on the righteous.

  Knowing that Christ came to take his kingdom from him by force, and to submit to His power and authority, those who submit to the deceitful, Satan showed Christ all the kingdoms of the earth, and all the inhabitants of the world; …….. he showed Him how he reigns on his victims through evil desires, meanness love of vain glory; and the attraction of beauty

  As a matter of fact, if we wish to know the extent of our misery, we shall simply find that Satan actually reigns on the majority of kingdoms of the world; hence the Lord calls him " the prince of this world" (John 12: 31; 16: 11)……. He showed Christ all the kingdoms and multitudes submitted to him "***in a moment of time***" (for the present time is considered as a moment if compared to eternity)…… As though saying to Him: Did you come to take away from Me all those under my authority?!..... No!, I counsel You not to compare Yourself to me; and not to subject Yourself to the troubles of this battle …….. See!: "***If You worship before me, all will be yours"*** (7)

  Our Lord and Savior intends to reign on us, yet with justice, truth, and every virtue; He refuses to be crowned a king without labor (the cross).

"***But Jesus answered and said to him: 'Go behind Me Satan, for it is written,'You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve"***

(Luke 4: 8 ; Deuteronomy 6: 13). My intention is that all will be for Me, worship Me, and to no one else. That is the royal intention. ……Do you want Me to sin, when I came to destroy sin, and to rid men of it?!

Let us then rejoice and exult for being the Lord's; Let us pray to Him to destroy the sin that reigned in our mortal bodies (Romans 6: 6); to reign alone on us.

(The scholar Origen)

+ "***He showed Him all the kingdoms of the world"*** (5)

How dare you, O cursed monster, to show the Lord the kingdoms of the world, and address Him saying: "***If you will worship before me, all will be yours"***(6)…… How could you promise to give what is not yours?! ……Who made you a heir to the kingdom of God?!..... You have taken all those kingdoms through cheat and deceit; ……Now give back what you have taken by force to the incarnate Son, the Lord of the whole world; and remember what the prophet Isaiah has previously proclaimed against the devil and his hosts: "*For Tophet was established of old. Yes, for the King it is prepared. He has made it deep and large. Its pyre is fire with much wood. The breath of the Lord, like a stream of brimstone kindles it"* (Isaiah 30: 33)

How could you dare, O Satan, approach the Lord, when your portion will be the deep pit?!..... How would the Lord worship before you, He whom the seraphim and all the hosts of angels will, not for even the blink of an eye, cease to praise His name; for it is written: "*You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve"* (8)?!

This verse has truly hit Satan in the heart; for he kept deceiving all those living underneath the blue heaven, to make all kneel before him with their knees. But now, as the Lord Christ has come, by His mercy, He intends to bring men back from their apostasy, to offer Him worship and glory.

(St. Cyril the Great)

+ Nothing is wrong with the authority itself, but with the vain covetousness. The establishment of authority, therefore, comes from God, and whoever uses it, would be an ambassador of God, being "*God's minister to you for good"* (Romans 13: 4). Nothing wrong with the work in itself,, but with him who execute it. ……. You have to discern between the good and the bad use of the authority and work.

(St. Ambrose)

+ On the top of a mountain, Satan showed Christ the perishable glory of the world,…… The Savior, on the other hand descended to the lower reaches to defeat the devil with humility.

(St. Jerome)

+ The Lord proclaimed that "*Satan is a liar from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth" (*John 8: 44), and being as such, he therefore utters, not the truth but lies, like when he claimed: "*This has been delivered to me, and I will give to whomever I wish"* (6)

(St. Erinaos)

+ Satan lied from the beginning, and persisted until the end; for he is not the one to whom the kingdoms of this world are delivered, but they are God's, as it is written: "*The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord"* (Proverb 21: 1).

And through the wise Solomon the Lord says: "*By Me, kings reign, and rulers decree justice; By Me princes rule and nobles; all the judges of the earth"* (Proverb 8: 15, 16)

(St. Erinaos)

+ God exposed Satan and revealed his true identity; by saying to him: "*Go behind Me, Satan*"……..He revealed it through his very name; for the word 'Satan' in Hebrew means (the apostate).

(St. Erinaos)

c- **A temptation in the sanctuaries:**

After attempting to tempt the Lord "Jesus" in the living bread, through asking Him to turn the stone into bread, in which he failed, when the Lord Christ presented Himself as the true Bread which takes off from the soul its stony nature; ……..And after intending to destroy Jesus' goal by opening before him the short and easy way to reign, without the need to go through the cross and the passions; in which he also failed, when the Lord persisted on going through the circle of the cross. ……Now, in his third temptation, which touches the worship to God, having taken place in Jerusalem, on the wing of the temple; in which Satan presented a verse from in the Holy Book, saying: ***"For it is written: He shall give His angels charge over you, to keep you; and in their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone"*** (10, 11); challenging the Lord to throw Himself down from the wing of the temple.

To such a temptation, in most cases, the shepherds, the ministers, and the godly men are often exposed; for the enemy fights them in (in the temple of God in Jerusalem); he presents to them verses from the Holy Book, distorted in some of its words, or in its understanding. In an attempt to turn their worship into formalities, show-off, and hypocrisy; he seeks from them, instead of ascending up toward the heavenlies, to throw themselves down from the wing of the temple; to let formalities and hypocrisy bring them down from their true goal.

+ "***Then he (Satan) brought Him to Jerusalem"*** (9).

It would be unbelievable to imagine how the devil leads the Son of God, and He follows him! like a wrestler who, without fear heads toward the arena, as though saying to the enemy [You will find Me stronger than you].

Satan brought Him up to the wing of the temple, and sought from Him to throw Himself down, under the false pretense that it is for the glory of God.

The devil talks to me quoting from the Holy Book …… I wish he does not succeed in deceiving me.

Meditate in the verse he shows the Lord; and look at how he is deceitful even in choosing the verses; with the intention to decrease the glory of God; by claiming that Jesus was in need of help from the angels; …….. how he quotes from the Holy Book, a verse that does not suit the Person of Christ, but the saints in a general way …… Christ is in no need of help from the angels, for He is greater than them, and inherits a greater and more exalted name :"*For to which of the angels did He ever say: 'You are My Son, today I have begotten You"* (Hebrew 1: 5-7; Psalm 2: 7).

After quoting the verse saying: "*He shall give His angel charge over you to keep you, and on their hands to bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone",* he, by intention, does not complete the verse, saying: "*You shall tread upon the lion and the cobra; the young lion and the serpent you shall trample under foot"* (Psalm 91: 13). …….You stopped there, O Satan; Because you are the cobra, king of the serpents. You stopped there because you know for sure, that you also bear another vicious power called "the lion", that is submitted under the feet of the righteous.

You are the "young lion and the cobra", If you stop quoting, and do not complete the verse against yourself, yet we, reading the Holy Book with uprightness, perceive that we are given by God the authority to trample you under our feet;, not only in the Old Testament; but in the New Testament as well; For the Lord says: "*Behold, I give you the authority to trample on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing by any means shall hurt you"* (Luke 10: 19).

(The scholar Origen)

+ "***If You are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here"*** (9)

The third temptation implied boasting and haughtiness: "*Throw yourself down from here", to prove Your Divinity before all the world. But :*

"Jesus answered and said to him: 'It has been said: 'You shall not tempt the Lord your God'" (12).

God does not help whomever dares to tempt Him; and Christ never performed a miracle to whomever meant to tempt Him; as it came that the Lord said: "*An evil and an adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Junah" (Matthew 12: 39).*

"***For it is written: 'He shall give His angels charge over you to keep you"*** (10)

(The wing of the temple refers to the high building built beside the temple).

See how the devil quotes from the divine books to help him to aim his mean arrow! This verse which came in the psalms does not refer to Christ, for Christ is in no need for angels.

(St. Cyril the Great)

+ That is the demon of vain glory. For when man thinks that he has risen up high, he may desire performing glamorous works, to end up falling down to the pit.

He said to Him: *"If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down from here"* No one utters such words except Satan in his attempt to bring the human spirit down from where it exalted by its virtues …….The devil will harm only him who pushes himself down below; namely, who forsakes heaven and chooses earth.

(St. ambrose)

+ Those are always the words of the devil, whose desire is for all to fall.

(St. Jerome)

"***And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from Him until an opportune time"*** (13).

In his persistence, in spite of his bitter defeat in all the temptations, Satan "*departed from Him until opportune time"* …….. The rest of the book came to include a continuous xxxxxxxxx between the Lord Christ and the devil in every way, whether directly or through His ministers. We, therefore, should not be deceived when we see the enemy depart from us, for he so does "until an opportune time", to come back to resume his attacks.

+ Hearing the name of "God" (12), the devil departed from Christ "until an opportune time"; for he did come back, not to tempt Him but to fight openly against Him…… The Holy Book tells you that "*you are not wrestling against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places:* (Ephesians 6: 12)

See how the Christian is exalted, how he fights against the rulers of the world (the devils). Even though he lives on earth, yet he spreads his spiritual power before the hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. We shall not be rewarded by earthly things in our fight for His sake; but our reward will be spiritual, namely, the kingdom of heaven, and the inheritance of Christ.

It is befitting of us to strive strongly against the devil; for as the crown is prepared for us, we are committed to war against him; for no one will be crowned unless he conquers, and no one conquers unless he fights (2 Timothy 2: 5); and the crown will be greater the more intense is the suffering; for "*narrow is the gate, and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it; and wide is the gate, and broad is the way that leads to destruction and death"* (Matthew 7: 13, 14)

It is befitting of us never to fear the temptations of this life; for they are an opportunity for conquest, and a material for victory…… The deceitful one persists on wounding the believer; who, courageously holds fast;…….. If you are subject to temptations, remember that the crowns are being prepared; ……. The righteous Joseph was cast in prison as a fruit of his purity; but he would never happen to govern Egypt unless he was sold by his brothers.

(St. Ambrose)

2- JESUS IN GALILEE:

"Then Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and news of him went out through all the surrounding region. And He taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all" (14, 15)

The Lord Christ carried the power of the Spirit, not as a new power that was not in Him before, but, having departed from the cities and gone into the wilderness, where He fasted, was tempted by the devil, and conquered him, after He was baptized; He returned to the cities of Galilee to present what He has done in the name of humanity, to make her bear by Him the power of the Spirit. In other words, what our Lord Jesus Christ has done, by setting forth into the wilderness, fasting, and conquering the devil, is nothing but a deposit to be enjoyed by all who intend to become His disciple. It is, therefore, not befitting of anyone to set forth to ministry, without this deposit of conquest and victory in the Lord.

+ Commenting on the phrase: *"He taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all",* the scholar Origen says: [Beware of blessing those who had the good fortune to hear the words directly from the mouth of Christ, and of feeling sorry for being

denied of that privilege…….for the Lord spoke, not only to the congregation of the Jews; but He still speaks, not only in our present assemblies, but in all assemblies all over the world. Jesus is still teaching and seeking tools to use to convey His teachings. …….. Today, Jesus is more glorified from all, for He is no longer known in one place (the Jewish people), boy all over the world.

(The scholar Origen)

3- JESUS REJECTED BY HIS OWN:

St. Luke presented to us a living portrait of the work done by that amazing Friend. He returned to minister in Nazareth where He had been brought up; and even though all bore witness to Him and marveled at the gracious words of grace which proceeded out of His mouth; yet they were offended by knowing that He was Joseph's son ……..And when He spoke to them about the fact that His friendship is wide open toward all – even the Gentiles – they, filled with wrath, decided to thrust Him down from the brow of the hill; but "*passing through the midst of them, He went His way"* (28-30).

What has taken place at the beginning of His ministry represents the larger portrait. What the people in Nazareth have done, was realized on a larger scope by the Jewish people as a whole, who rejected Him, who came to His own, and crucified Him, to get rid of Him. Yet, what the people of Nazareth have done was an integral part of the plane of the cross. …… Even though He, who granted the world salvation and life, was brought up in Nazareth, yet His own town chose to be condemned with perdition and death.

Now, let us quote the comments of some fathers on the following evangelic text:

"***So He came to Nazareth where He had been brought up; and as His custom was, He went into the Synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read"*** (16).

+ As Christ was anointed by the Father, a Savior for the whole world, it was necessary for Christ to show Himself to the Jewish people, as well as to the other peoples, to reveal His redemption work to the whole world. Yet the Lord Christ chose, in particular to favor the people of Nazareth by starting with them, on account of that He was brought up in their midst.

  When He came into Nazareth, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read, a chapter in the book of Isaiah that referred to redemption, and to how Christ the Word will appear in the world as a Man to save it. …… We truly believe that there was no way before Christ to be anointed the Holy anointment, other than to come to the world as a Man, and to take upon Himself the nature of man.

  Christ was the incarnate God. Being God, Christ would grant the Holy Spirit to the entire creation; and being Man He would receive the Holy Spirit from God His Father. While sanctifying the whole creation, whether by shining His splendor from His high-up dwelling place, that of God the Father; or by granting the Holy Spirit to the heavenly world that believes in Him, and to the earthly world that confesses His incarnation.

(St. Cyril the Great)

"And He was handed the book of the prophet Isaiah. And when He had opened the book, He found the place where it was written: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor" (17, 18)

+ Once Jesus opened the book He found before Him the text that prophesied Him…… He read the text concerning "the secret of Christ": that is "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me; He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor"* . …….. it so came, not by mere chance, but according to the divine will and grace.

  Now, notice how Jesus applied those words saying: "*He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor"* to Himself in the synagogue,. …….. Yes, they were poor indeed; Having had neither God, nor prophet, nor justice nor any virtue; Jesus was sent for their sake, being poor.

(The scholar Origen)

+ The Lord Himself confirmed to them that He is the One about whom the prophecies spoke; for He has got the holy anointment and the heavenly power,

  "***He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted; to proclaim liberty to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind; to set at liberty those who are compressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord"*** (18, 19)**,**

Which extends along the infinite years, and grants men the continuity of harvest and eternal comfort. While He enriched everyone, and despised no one, we the mean race, see His body, and reject His Divinity, proclaimed through the miracles He performed.

(St. Ambrose)

+ **"*The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me: because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor"*** (18)

We can deduce from these words that Christ has emptied Himself of the heavenly glories, for the sake of our salvation……. The Holy Spirit, by nature, is in Christ; How then would He descends upon the Lord from above?!..... In the River Jordan, as well, the Holy Spirit descended to anoint Jesus, for no other cause except for that Christ has taken upon Himself to grant the grace of salvation to us, through granting us the Holy Spirit; we who were without the grace of the Holy Spirit, according to the words of the Holy Inspiration, saying: "*My Spirit shall not strive with man forever"* (Genesis 6: 3).

The incarnate Christ uttered those words, for He is the true God from the true God; incarnated without undergoing any change; anointed by the anointment of joy and gladness; and the Holy Spirit came upon Him in the form of a dove. ……..We know that, when kings and priests were anointed in the old covenant, they were sanctified to a certain extent; but the Lord Christ, was anointed with the spiritual ointment of sanctification, not for His own sake, but for our sake; on account of the fact that, as humans were denied the Holy Spirit, a cloud of sorrow and depression dwelt upon the earth.

(St. Cyril the Great)

"He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind; to set at liberty those who are oppressed; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord" (18, 19)

+ We were captives to the devil; and Jesus came to proclaim liberty to the captives; and recovery of sight to the blind by His words and preaching…… Man was guilty, a murderer, and a captive, before having the liberty and healing from Jesus.

(The scholar Origen)

+ Christ proclaimed liberty to the captives by shackling the feet of Satan in chains; the tyrant over the necks of men; who robbed Christ of His flocks and creation, the Lord came to bring back what the devil has robbed through oppression.

Christ came to bring back the hearts that were seduced by Satan, who casted a curtain of pitch darkness on the earth, came to scatter that darkness, to let His flock walk in bright light, as it came in the apostle Paul's epistle to the Thessalonians, saying: "*You are all sons of light, and sons of the day; we are not of the night nor of darkness"* (Thessalonians 5: 5)

Through the coming of Christ the Savior and redeemer, the sight was recovered to the blind, light was given on the paths, and heights were paved, according to the words of God, on the tongue of Isaiah: "*I, the Lord, have called You in righteousness, and will Hold Your hand; I will keep You and give You as a covenant to the people, as a light to the Gentiles"* (Isaiah 42: 6)

Christ came and proclaimed a new covenant to His brethren the children of Israel, but the bright light dwelt, as well, upon the Gentiles; proclaiming liberty to the captives and the brokenhearted; which all indicate that Christ, by nature is the true God from the true God.

Saying: "*proclaiming liberty to the captives",* refers to the miserable people whom the devil caught in his snares.

Now, what is the meaning of "*to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord"??* This refers to the acceptable year in which Christ chose to be crucified on our behalf, for by His cross, we are accepted by God the Father, from whom we were for long separated; it is written: "*The Lord says: If I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all peoples to Myself"* (John 12: 32). Indeed Christ was risen on the third day, overcoming the power of death; hence He says: "*All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth"* (Matthew 28: 18)

Is it not an acceptable year, in which we joined the household of Christ; when on us the banner of Jesus was raised; when we were purified by the holy baptism; and partook of the divine nature of Christ through getting the Holy Spirit?

Is it not an acceptable year, in which Christ has shown His glory by amazing signs; in which we joyfully received the grace of salvation and redemption; according to the words of the wise apostle Paul: *"In an acceptable time I have heard you, and in the day of salvation I have helped you"* (2 Corinthians 6: 2)?; ……Yes indeed, it is acceptable, for in it the

Gentiles came to possess the heavenly treasure of the gospel, and the joyful message of heaven, after being far from salvation, with no hope for rescue; and having no God in Whom they may take refuge in the world. ……..Now, we are members in the Christian kingdom, partners of the good hosts of the saints, and heirs of graces and blessings beyond imagination by the mind, or description by the tongue: *"Eye has not seen, nor ear has heard, nor had entered into the heart of man, the things which God has prepared for those who love Him"* (1 Corinthians 2: 9)

The term "*brokenhearted"* refers to those faint-hearted, of shaky dogma; who, not able to resist the evil desires, loose the riddle to their mean emotions, to end up fallen in a narrow captivity. Yet Christ promises those people to set them free from their captivity, and pleads with them, saying: [Return to Me, that I heal you and forgive your sins and iniquities].

Those whose eyes became blind, Christ will grant them the light; for they became blind on account of that they worshipped the creation instead of the Creator, "*Saying to a tree: 'you are my father', and to a stone; 'you gave birth to me'"* (Jeremiah 2: 27). Being ignorant of the divine nature of Christ, such people's minds were denied the true spiritual light.

No one would object to refer all these things to the congregation of Israel, who came to be poor, brokenhearted, and captives, going around aimlessly in the darkness of the night, "*They have all turned aside; they have together become corrupt; there is none who does good, no, not one"* (Psalm 14: 3)

Christ came down and preached to the Israelites before any other people. Yet the other nations, who were not less ignorant and blind than the Israelites, Christ enriched with His wisdom, instructed them with His knowledge, and turned them from the weakness of reason, to the soundness of dogma.

(St. Cyril the Great)

"***Then He closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant and sat down, and the eyes of all who were in the synagogue were fixed on Him. And He began to say to them: 'Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing'"*** (20, 21).

The words of the Lord Christ came to interpret this wonderful prophecy, for it was a divine work which was fulfilled by his coming; hence the Evangelist says: "*The eyes of all who were in the Synagogue were fixed on Him".*

\+ Uttering those clear prophesies, His listeners were amazed, and wondered among themselves, [from where has He got such great wisdom, when He never studied the Jewish literature?!] …….It was the custom of the Jews, on account of that they have turned aside from the way of reason and prudence, and followed a twisted distorted way. to interpret the prophesies concerning the Messiah as having been already fulfilled in their kings or prophets,

To avoid falling in the same fault in which the Jews did, and to avoid any vagueness they may fall into, Christ addressed them very frankly and clearly, saying: "*Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing".* He said to them that the prophecy refers to Him; for He is the One who preached the word of salvation to the pagans, who were with no God nor law nor prophets, and were for long denied the spiritual talents; ……. the One who gave liberty to the captives who endured the bitterness of shackles and chains; …….and the One who gave light to the ways of truth and virtue, to those on whom a cloud of darkness has closed the ways shut. Hence the Lord said: "*I have come as a Light into the world*" (John 12: 46). And came to break down the shackles of iniquity, to proclaim the sound justice, and finally to proclaim an acceptable year as the sign of His first coming, the banner of His salvation, and the slogan for the whole human race.

"All bore witness to Him, and marveled at the gracious words which proceeded out of His mouth" (22)

The Israelites, not perceiving the Person of Christ, nor knowing that He is the anointed of God, God of the miracles and signs, have gone astray from His teachings and uttered vanity against Him. And even though they all witnessed to the words of wisdom which proceeded out of His mouth, yet, being overcome by the spirit of doubt, they said: "*Is he not Joseph's son?"* (22). ……Could such a fact quench the bright light of the signs He performed? Why would He not be received with reverence even though He is Joseph's son? Have they not seen the miracles He performed?; Have they not watched how sin was buried in its grave, how Satan was imprisoned in the pit, and how his hosts were shamefully defeated?!

Even though the Israelites bore testimony to the flood of grace which proceeded from Christ's tongue, yet they poured their wrath on Him for belonging to Joseph. What an incredible ignorance! …… On them the words of the Holy Scripture apply, saying: "*Hear now, O foolish people, without understanding, who have eyes and see not, and who have ears and hear not"* (Jeremiah 5: 21).

(St. Cyril the Great)

+ "***"And the eyes of all who were in the Synagogue were fixed on Him"*** (20)

Up till the present time this happens in our assemblies and meetings, where our eyes would be fixed on the Savior, to meditate in the only begotten Son of God, the Wisdom and the Truth ……. How I long to be among such congregation ……. Where all, catechumen, believers, men, women, and children, have the eyes of their souls, not those of the body, preoccupied with looking at Jesus; as looking at Him makes His light reflect upon their faces to become more illuminated

(The scholar Origen)

+ ***"He said to them, 'You will surely say this proverb to Me: 'Physician, heal yourself'; Whatever we have heard done in Capernaum, do also here in your country'. Then He said, 'Assuredly I say to you, no prophet is accepted in his own country'"*** (23, 24).

As though, on the wrong assumption that the Lord Christ seeks temporal glory or honor from people, they say to him: [You, who have had the fame of doing miracles in a strange country, do them among your own people and relatives in your country];

+ ***"You will surely say to Me: 'Physician, heal yourself'*** (33)

This proverb was common among the Jews, and addressed to the physicians and the wise. ……. The Lord Christ told them that they seek from Him to perform miracles before their eyes, in the town he was brought up, which, they believe, is more worthy than any other place for such wonders and signs. But Christ drew their attention, as well, to that everything common is rejected, as proved by the fact, that even, after they bore witness to the words of wisdom which proceeded from His mouth, yet they defamed Him by saying: "*Is he not Joseph's son?";* No wonder then, if they go further to keep their eyes shut to His teachings; to say to them: "*Assuredly I say to you, no prophet is accepted in his own country"* (24).

Even though the Lord Christ did not reject that proverb, saying: '*Physician, heal yourself*', yet He made clear that it does not apply to him; for it is befitting of every teacher to proclaim his teachings through his life before his words, lest this proverb would apply to him.

According to St. John Chrysostom: [By that the Lord Himself put work ahead of teaching …… For whoever cannot teach himself, while attempting to mend the ways of others, would be mocked by many. Or rather such a man will never have the ability to teach, for his works utter what is contrary to his words].

That proverb, therefore does not apply to the Lord Christ, whose works bore witness to His words …… but the secret of their offense in the Lord, came merely for belonging to their country, that the proverb saying: No prophet is accepted in his own country", also applies to them.

+ If 'Anathoth, Jeremiah's home town (Jeremiah 11: 21) did not receive him well, so were Isaiah and the rest of the prophets rejected by the people of circumcision ……..Contrary to them, we, who do not belong, but foreigners to the covenant, received Moses and the prophets who proclaimed Christ from our hearts, more than the Jews who rejected and did not bear witness to Him.

(The scholar Origen)

The Lord Christ used the opposition of His own town, a chance to proclaim His friendship on the level of all mankind, confirming that the collectiveness of the divine work has its roots even in the old covenant, saying:

"But I tell you truly, many widows were in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up for three years and six months, and there was a great famine throughout all the land; but to none of them was Elijah sent except to Zerephath in the region of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. And many lepers were in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian" (25, 26).

Those words were tough on the Jewish ear, for the Jew assumed that he has a special favor in God's eye, for having the law, the covenants, the promises, and the prophesies; and that from his race, the Messiah will eventually come …….. But the Lord Christ revealed the truth of His love for all men with no discrimination. In the days of the prophet Elijah, the widow of Sidon enjoyed what many Jewish women did not; and the Gentile leper Naaman the Syrian has got what the Jewish lepers did not get (1 kings 17; 2 kings 5).

+ Here we see the prophet Elisha heals, not one of his own race or religion, but of a foreign race, without the law. Is this not a proof that healing depends on the will of the one seeking it, and not on his race; and that, we enjoy the divine blessings

according to the longing of our hearts, and we are not given it according to the place of our birth?!..... Let us then learn to pray fervently seeking what we wish for; for the fruits of the divine blessings are not given to the lukewarm.

The widow to whom the prophet Elijah was sent was a symbol of the church, whose congregation came unclean, from all nations; before they were baptized in the Holy water, to be cleansed from the defilements of the body and soul ……Naaman the Syrian commander, is not anymore a leper, but was healed, not by the command of an earthly king, but according to the abundance of the Divine Mercy; and came out of the River Jordan like a pure chaste virgin, not having a spot or a wrinkle (Ephesians 5: 26); and became a symbol of the salvation of the Gentiles.

The way prophet Elisha rejected the gift, presented to him by the one healed, guided by the faith he learned; You, as well, be sure to walk according to what you were taught, of the Lord's principles, following the Lord's counsel: "*Freely you have received, freely give"* (Matthew 10:8). Do not exchange God's grace with money……. It is unbefitting of a priest in doing the Holy Sacraments, to think of riches, but of the ministry …….Teach this to your subordinates; and in case you find out that one of them is a money-lover, like 'Gehazi', Elisha's servant, send him away as the prophet did, who said to his servant: "*Is it time to receive money, and to receive clothing, olive groves and vineyards, sheep and oxen, male and female servants? Therefore the leprosy of Naaman shall cling to you and your descendants forever"* (2 kings 5; 26, 27).

(St. Ambrose)

Anyway, the Lord Christ presented the example of that widow to the Jews, as having enjoyed what many Jewish widows have not, in the days of Elijah. ……That widow has drawn the hearts of many fathers of the church; and about her, St. John Chrysostom said: [That widow was more generous than our father Abraham, who gave hospitality to strangers – the Lord and two angels – from the abundance of his riches; whereas that widow presented her livelihood to the prophet of God, risking her own life to the danger of death through hunger. …….. We do not mean to belittle the hospitality of our father Abraham; but, at the same time, we do not deny the exaltation of the action of that Gentile widow. About her St. Ambrose spoke abundantly, specially in his essay about the widows; seeing in her a symbol of the church which enjoyed the blessings of the Messiah who opened up heaven to rain an abundance of His divine secrets.

\+ The famine was all over the place, yet that widow was the only one not in need…….. Those three years, were they not after which the Lord came to find no fruits in the fig tree, and said: "*For three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and found none. Cut it down; why does it use up the ground"* (Luke 13: 7).

That widow is surely the one about whom it was written: "*Sing, O barren, you who have not borne! Break forth into singing and cry loud, you who have not labored with child! For more are the children of the desolate, than the children of the married woman, says the Lord"* (Isaiah 54: 2); and, "*You will forget the shame of your youth, and will not remember the reproach of your widowhood any more"* (Isaiah 54: 4).

She (the Church), probably became a widow, when she lost her Man through passion in His body; but she will receive Him on the day of judgment as the Son of Man whom she thought she lost, while "He left her for a moment " for her faith to be justified in more glory.

The Church is 'a virgin', 'a wife', and 'a widow' at the same time, the three together in one body in Christ. …: She is that 'widow' for whose sake there was a famine for the heavenly Word on earth, to which the prophets referred. …….. And she was a barren 'wife', who was kept to give birth in the proper time.

Who opened before her the windows of heaven, but Christ who brings out of the sinners food for the growth of the Church?! ……Who has the authority to say: "*The bin of flour shall not be used up, nor shall the jar of oil run dry, until the day the Lord sends rain on the earth"* (1 kings 17: 14) ; ……. It is God who perpetually grants His divine secrets; who promises to send, by His grace, the unceasing spiritual joy; and presents the requirements of life, the seals of faith, and the gifts of virtues.

(St. Ambrose)

"The Jews, filled with wrath when they heard Him break their haughtiness, thrust Him out of the city, and led Him to the brow of the hill on which their city was built, that they might throw Him down over the cliff"
(28,29)

According to St. Ambrose: [That was the plan of the Jews about which the prophet prophesied…….. While the Lord spread His mercies on the multitudes, they were busy pouring curses upon Him; No marvel to seem them lose salvation, and thrust the Lord out of their city…….. He went through passion by His own free will; He delivered Himself to them. When He chose to be arrested, and to be crucified, nothing hindered Him to consummate His mission.

"***"Then passing through the midst of them, He went His way"*** (30)

He passed through the midst of them by the power of His Divinity, hoping that, when they realize how they failed to throw Him down the cliff, when He was in their midst, they might repent and be healed, and not perish; And according to St. Cyril the Great: [Christ passed through the midst of them, and He went His way, not out of fear, but on account of that His hour has not yet come. He was just beginning His preaching mission, and He would not forsake it before He consummate spreading the word of salvation and truth].

According to St. Augustine: [After the traitor Judas sold Him; To show that He is going through all that by His own free will, when they came to arrest Him, He said to them: "*Whom are you seeking?, they answered 'Jesus of Nazareth'; and Jesus said: 'I am He', they drew back and fell to the ground"* (John 18: 4-6)].

4- JESUS WORKING WITH AUTHORITY:

"Then He went down to Capernaum, a city of Galilee, and was teaching them on the Sabbath; and they were astonished at His teaching, for His word was with authority" (31, 32)

He stretched His hand to His relatives in the city of Nazareth; but having been set on the high hills of the 'ego', it rejected His friendship, and its people even intended to throw Him down the cliff on which their city was built …….The Lord then went down to Capernaum, meaning (the city of repose or comfort). The secret of its comfort is that, being below the sea level, it bore the spirit of humility, to receive the friendship of her Groom, and His work of salvation.

+ "*He was teaching them on the Sabbath, and they were astonished at His teaching, for His word was with authority*", not like the scribes'. The Jews were astonished and confused, when they saw before them a teacher who addresses them, not only as a prophet, but as a great God, before whom the spirit should worship before the body. Even though He is God of the law, He uttered principles that exalt above the law, according to the Scripture, saying: "*I will make an everlasting covenant with you – the sure mercies of David. Indeed I have given Him as a witness to the people; a leader and commander for the people"* (Isaiah 55: 3, 4; Acts 13: 34).

(St. Cyril the Great)

+ Meditate in the mercy of our Savior Christ, in how He was not offended by their reproach, nor dismayed by their oppression, to make Him forsake them and depart from Judah; but forgetting their iniquities, and only thinking of His mercy, he went ahead teaching, healing from the evil spirit, and illnesses; and searching for ways to soften the hardness of their hearts.

(St. Ambrose)

Presenting to us many concepts of the evangelic expression: "*For His word was with authority"* (32), the Scholar Tertullian says: [On one aspect, they were not mere words, but included the power and activity of work]. Hence he .addresses the followers of Mercion, saying: [Give ear to the words of my Christ! For His works speak].

And the Lord Christ Himself says: "*Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father in Me; or else, believe Me for the sake of the works themselves. Most assuredly I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do, he will do also, and greater works than these he will do"* (John 14: 11, 12). His authority is not in showing His unity with the Father, through the signs He performs with authority, but through His work in us.

According to
the scholar Tertullian in the same talk: [On another aspect, His words were with authority, having consummated the law and the prophets. His divine talk presented authority and grace; He was building and not destroying the essence of the law and the prophets].

On a third aspect, His authority was shown in His alk about how Satan got terrified, and could not endure His words: [Satan certainly knew that Jesus is the Son of God, who firmly condemns and avenges (the devil), and not just a good Man].

The Lord Christ came as an intimate Friend of man, not only to teach him with authority, and not like the scribes and the Pharisees, but works to His own account with authority. That is why we see some man in the synagogue, in whom the evil spirit , as the enemy of men, could not endure the presence of that Friend, cries out, saying: "*Let us alone! What have we to do with You, Jesus of Nazareth? Did You come to destroy us? I know who You are – the Holy One of God"* (34).

The devil spirit was terrified before the presence of the Holy One, feeling that He worked with authority and power; and that his own kingdom collapses before Him. But the Lord Christ rejected the testimony of Satan, and rebuked

him, saying: "*Be quiet, and come out of him"* (35). Seeing that, "*They were all amazed and spoke among themselves, saying: "What a word this is, for with authority and power, He commands the unclean spirits, and they come out"* (36)

+ Feeling the greatness of the power of the Lord Christ, and having been afflicted with failure and defeat, the unclean spirits had to seek from the Lord with craftiness to "*let them alone"* (34). …There is no relationship between the Lord and the unclean spirit, but this is the language of hypocrisy.

The unclean spirits confessed that Christ is "*Holy One of God"* (34); with the assumption that such a language might make the Lord bask in the vain greatness and haughtiness, and stop rebuking and chastising them; but, despite their craftiness, the unclean spirits fell victims of their own deceit; on account of that God could never be deceived; hence Christ muted them and ordered them to come out.

No wonder that those present were all amazed because they saw how Christ performed miracles without praying for power from high above, on account that He Himself is God, the Word of God the Father by whom everything was created; the thorn of the devil was broken, and the tongues of the unclean spirits were muted.

(St. Cyril the Great)

+ (Commenting on beginning His healing miracles and driving the evil spirits out in the Sabbath)
The Lord began His healing miracles in the Sabbath to proclaim that the new creation starts where the old one ends; and to refer, from the beginning, that the Son of God does not submit to the law, but is the Lord of the law, which He came, not to destroy, but to fulfill it (Mathew 5: 17). For the world was not created by the law, but by the Word, according to what is written: "*By the word of the Lord, heaven is made"* (Psalm 33: 6). Christ, therefore, did not mean, not tyo destroy the law but to fulfill it, to renew the fallen man; hence the apostle says: "*Put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him"* (Colossians 3:10)The Lord began working on the Sabbath to show that He, being the Creator, He binds the works together, and consummates the work He started Himself.

(St. Ambrose)

+ (Commenting on the devil's confession: "*I know who You are: the Holy One of God")*
There should be a difference between our faith and that of the devils. While our faith purifies the heart; that of the devils makes him sin and do evil; saying to the Lord: "*Let us alone! What have we to do with You?!"*

(St. Augustine)

Healing Peter's mother-in-law:

Healing the man in whom was the evil spirit was publicly done in the synagogue; Now the Lord heals Peter's mother-in-law in her house, where Peter invited Him to eat ……. He is the our Friend who works to our account wherever and whenever He may be.

We have already talked about this particular healing miracle in our study of the gospel according to Mathew (8: 5) and to Mark (1: 31)…….. And we saw how Simon Peter did not request anything for himself or his own, but invited Him to eat; and the Lord granted him what he did not ask for. It was those around the Lord who "**requested from Him concerning her";** a living portrait of the practical unity of love, and of the intercession of the members of the Church for one another from the On Head, our Lord Jesus Christ.

+ Peter's mother-in-law probably portrays our body, inflicted by the fever of the diverse sins, that pushed it to a multitude of evil desires, that burn the heart together with the body.

(St. Ambrose)

Commenting on the Lord's visit to Peter's mother-in-law, St. Ambrose say: [He did not hesitate to visit the widows, and to enter into the narrow rooms in the poor huts]

Even though many heard of what the Lord Christ did, yet they did not dare to carry the sick to Him to heal before sunset (40), when the Sabbath ends, and Sunday begins, for fear of breaking the Sabbath if they so did ……..Observing the Sabbath in their eyes was more important than healing the sick.

Anyway, He did not admonish them, but proclaimed the authority of His love, "***He laid His hands (most probably in the form of the cross) on everyone of them and healed them"*** (40).

+ I wish you would notice the power of His body if He touched someone; power that heals a diversity of illnesses in a moment time, and defeats Satan and his followers. Even though the Lord could perform the miracles by His word without

> stretching His hand, yet He insisted on laying His hand on the sick, to teach us that the holy body He took on Himself as His temple, was the power of the divine Word. …….. I pray to God the Word to bind us t Him; I pray to Him to make us bind to Him in the secret fellowship of the body of Christ; by which it would be possible for the soul to be healed from all her ailments, and become able to prevail on the attacks and the animosity of the devils.
>
> (St. Cyril the Great)

Inviting the Lord Christ to his house, it was not only Peter's mother-in-law who was healed of her fever, but Peter's house became a center toward which all the sick and those afflicted by the evil spirits head to enjoy the work of the Lord Christ in them …….. hen the Lord enters into our hearts, many, together with us will enjoy His comfort and peace.

According to St. Cyril the Great, the multitudes that enjoyed the Lord's work refer to the life of man with all its talents, emotions, and possibilities, enjoying healing and comfort in Him.

The demons cried out saying: "*You are the Son of God"*, But He kept on rebuking and muting them According to St. Cyril the Great:[He did not allow the demons to confess Him, for it would be unbefitting to let them force themselves on the apostolic task. Moreover, it is unbefitting to let them, with their unclean tongues, utter the secret of the redemption of Christ. ……. Yes indeed, those evil spirits should not be believed, even if they happen to say the truth; for the light could not be revealed by help from the darkness; as according to the apostle of Christ: "*What communion has light with darkness; and what accord has Christ with Belial?"* (2 Corinthians 6: 14, 15)].

And according to St. Ambrose: [It is the nature of Satan to confess the Lord Christ, but denies Him by his works].

And according to St. John Chrysostom: [The Lord did not allow the demons to utter a word; on account of that, while healing the body of the sick, and driving out the evil spirits, He intended, as well, to heal their spirits; telling them that He does all that not as showing off, nor for temporal glory……

6-JESUS PREACHING IN THE SYNAGOGUES OF GALILEE:

Having performed so many healing miracles after sunset of the Sabbath, at the start of Sunday, we do not know how many hours the Lord worked among the multitudes who came to Him to be healed; except that, according to the Evangelist: "*When it was day, He departed and went into a deserted place"* (42); namely early in the morning, drawing the hearts of the faithful ministers to the secret encounter with God the Father, lest they would miss their goal.

Anyway, the multitude did not leave Him alone, but "*The crows sought Him and came to Hm, and tried to keep Him from leaving them".* But, with great love He said to them: "*I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also"* (43)…… We may say that the more a minister sits in secret with God, the more His heart would kindle toward the salvation of the world; for the true life of contemplation opens the heart more, and ignites it to long for the salvation of all.

==========

THE THIRD DIVISION

OUR FRIEND FEELS OUR SUFFERINGS

(Chapters 5 to 18)

CHAPTER 5

JESUS SUPPORTS THE TOILED

The Lord Christ, in His ministry, set forth to support the toiled; ……to fill the nets of those who toiled the whole night in vain;……to cleanse someone full of leprosy; …….to correct the inner views of the Pharisees and teachers of the law; …… to draw the tax-collectors from their locations; …… and to proclaim the new life that he grants to His disciples …….He supports whomever accepts Him; and grants him fruition, purity, and sanctity for his mind and behavior through the new life.

1- Fishing 1 - 11
2- Cleansing a leper 12 - 16
3- Healing the paralyzed 17 - 26
4- Calling Levi the tax-collector 27 - 32
5- Proclaiming the new wine 33 – 39

1- FISHING:

In our study of the two gospels, according to Matthew (4: 18) and Mark (1: 16-20) we saw how the Lord Christ, in choosing His disciples, started by those four illiterate fishermen: Simon Peter – representing faith (the rock of faith); Andrews – representing maturity and seriousness; James – representative of strife (persistence); and John – representing the compassion and grace of God. The Lord chose them to preach, not by the philosophy of the world and the wisdom of this age, but by the grace of God working in them. We said that those four represent the horses of the chariot of God to carry the Church setting forth to heaven; namely the new faith, and the strife bound to God's grace and compassion.

We saw how those four men, at the beginning followed the Lord intermittingly, then go every now and then to fish, to earn their living; until they were commanded to dedicate themselves completely to the Lord, when "*they forsook all and followed Him"* (11)

St. Luke presents to us the Lord's encounter with them while totally exhausted physically and mentally, after *"toiling all night and caught nothing"* (5); it is as though an exalted command was issued to the fish not to enter the nets of the two boats all night long, until the Sun of Rightness, our Lord Jesus Christ, comes and enters into one of the boats, and instruct them to go to the deep in mid- day, and cast their nets to catch enough fish to fill the two boats.

In this event we notice the following:

(1) ***The Lord saw two boats standing by the lake, but the fishermen had gone from them and were washing their nets"*** (2)

According to St. Augustine: [There were two boats, from which He called His four disciples; referring to (the two peoples) from whom, when they cast their nets of preaching, "*they caught a great number of fish, that their nets were breaking".* The two boats refer to one Church of two peoples, and despite being from two different sources, are united together in Christ.
Concerning that, we find as symbols, two wives of one man – Jacob – Leah and Rachel (Genesis 29: 23, 28). …… We also find two blind men, sitting on the side of the way, whom the Lord granted them eyesight (Matthew 20: 33)).

Meditating in the Holy Book you will find, in many locations the two Churches which are actually one Church, to which the Cornerstone came to bind together, and to make them one.

(2) The men washed their nets, for the whole night passed and they caught nothing, to remain all day in bitterness, waiting for the new evening to resume their effort anew. Those fishermen, though, were not aware of the fact that their failure was planned by the Lord for an eternal and temporal success…….. The two boats having been completely empty of fish, was also planned, so that the fishermen would not be preoccupied with gathering, sorting, and selling the fish, but to receive the Lord in the boat and use it as a podium for teaching, through which He catch the fishermen as well as the multitudes. …….. Yet, at the same time, not to deny them the pleasure of catching fish, He commanded them to cast their nets in the deep, where they caught enough fish that their nets were breaking.

When doors are closed shut before our eyes, and feel that our luck is bad, which is actually a kind of feeling not befitting of believers, let us open our hearts wide before the Lord, let us present to Him the boat of our life to sail it according to His good will; for He will certainly bring to us "gladness of salvation"; and will present to us spiritual fruition, without denying us, even, of the temporal necessities.

(3) After enjoying the pleasure of catching fish, well known to fishermen, the Lord lifts them up to a deeper pleasure, namely to catching souls, and bringing them out of the sea of this world. They would never taste such experience, unless they, themselves, are caught first by the Lord in His net, and brought forth into His boat – the Holy Church – about which St. Cyril the Great says:

[Let us commend the way those disciples became the fishermen of the whole world, submitted to Christ, the Creator of heaven and earth. Commanded to catch the other peoples in their nets, the disciples first were themselves caught in the secure net of the Lord, so that, when they cast their own nets, they would catch a multitude of believers to the true boat of Christ. That was prophesied by one of the saintly prophets, saying: "*Behold, I will send many fishermen, says the Lord, and they shall fish them, then afterwards I shall send many hunters, and they shall hunt them"* (Jeremiah 16: 16). The fishermen in this verse refer to the blessed apostles; while the hunters refer to the shepherds of the churches].

According to St. Ambrose:[What are the net, the apostles are commanded to cast in the depth, but the power of reason in their preaching, which would make it difficult for those it catches to get away. How convenient is the net as the tool the apostles use, for it causes no harm to those it catches, but bring them intact and safe from the pit to light; from the deep to high places].

Such an experience was lived by our teacher the apostle Paul, whom, since he himself was caught by the net of the mercy of the Lord, he did not cease to cast his own net to catch people by the grace of God; he says: "*Since we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we do not lose heart"* (2 Corinthians 4: 1).

(4) The divine command was: ***"Launch out into the deep, and let down your net for a catch"*** (5)

If such a command came from a regular person, it would offend the professional fishermen, who by their long experience know that catching fish would be better by night, close to the shore, and not during mid-day, into the deep.

Simon Peter's response came bearing two tunes: that of the old human experience, with what it includes of failure and despair; and a new tone, separated by the word "nevertheless"; namely entering from the mere human experience to 'the experience of faith in the active word of the Lord' (5).

According to St. Augustine: [The Lord Christ did not tell the fishermen to cast their nets from the right hand side of the boat to catch the good fish; nor from its left hand side to catch the bad fish, but told them to cast them into the deep to catch both. For the call is for all to enter into the nets of the Church, to enjoy the evangelic life]. And [The fishermen did not bring the fish to the shore, but poured them into the two boats, intending for all to enjoy life in the Church, and not outside her.

(5) "***"But Simon answered and said to Him: 'Master, we have toiled all night and caught nothing. Nevertheless, at your word, I will let down the net'"*** (5)

However man strives in ministry, without trusting in God, and holding fast to the word and promises of the Lord, is counted by Simon Peter, as nothing but toil through the darkness of the night without fruition; Nevertheless, at the word of the Lord, man would let down his net to get fruition. …. According to St. Ambrose, on the tongue of Simon Peter: [Master, I know for sure that the darkness of the night will be over me when You are not my Leader; that darkness will surround me if I throw vain words (on my own)].

St. Ambrose goes on to proclaim that Simon Peter's strife all night without fruition, refers to him who preaches with human eloquence and mere philosophies. Therefore came the urgent need for preaching to be (in the day time), when Christ, the Sun of Righteousness shines, giving His active word that fills the nets of the Church with live fish; saying: [So far, they caught nothing, but, at the word of the Lord, they caught an enormous quantity of fish; not the fruition of human experience, but of the seed of heaven. Let us, therefore forsake the human way of convincing, and hold fast to the work of faith by which peoples would come to believe].

(6) ***"When they had done this they caught a great number of fish, and their net was breaking. So they signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink"*** (6, 7).

The Lord Christ used to perform miracles, as a sign of compassion on the sick, on whoever possessed by an evil spirit; to raise the son of a suffering widow; or to feed the hungry multitude ……. But this miracle, came, not to fulfill a physical need, nor as compassion on a destroyed soul, but to proclaim the work of the Lord Christ in His future Church of both the Jews and the Gentiles, to fill her with live fish.

In our study of the symbols, we saw that "the fish" symbolizes the Lord Christ Himself, as well as to His believers. The Church is full of the chosen, the fish which perpetually live in the water of baptism, attached to "The Fish", the Grantor of life.

Commenting on such a great catch, St. Cyril the Great says:[Their nets got filled by miracle, for the disciple to trust that their preaching work, among the pagans and the lost, will not be in vain; But, being unable to haul the net, they, in awe, had to signal to their partners in the other boat to come to help them. This means that, along the generations, many of the teachers and shepherds of the people have, seriously and actively, helped the saintly apostles in their preaching work; and still are, to make the people understand the meaning of the exalted verses of the gospel, and the teachings of the sound truth.

The net is still cast, and Christ is still filling it with ministers from among those sunk in the stormy seas of the world; it came in the psalms: "*Deliver me out of the mire, and let me not sink; let me be delivered from those who hate me"* (Psalm 69: 14).

(7) Simon Peter did not care to see such an enormous catch of fish; as much as his depths were immensely drawn to the Person of the Messiah, who has such an authority on heaven, earth, and seas (Psalm 8:8). Unable to perceive that exalted light, nor endure to approach the Holy One, to confess his sins, In awe filling his depths, revealing his inner sins before the Lord,

"***he fell down at Jesus knees, saying: 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord'"*** (8).

Feeling great awe, he cried out: "*Depart from me, O Lord",* and in his humility and his feeling of weakness, he deserved to have the Lord enter into the depths of his heart, there to set His kingdom! As, according to St. John Chrysostom: [Nothing is more acceptable for God like when man counts himself the last of all. That is the foundation of the practical wisdom].

The humility of the apostle peter was not just words or mere emotion, but was a positive reaction to the living work; for it is written about him and his partners,

"***When they had brought their boats to land they forsook all and followed Him"*** (11); ……

they forsook all to dedicate the whole heart to Him whom they loved, by true worship and preaching. Humility is not a feeling of weakness, but is throwing oneself into the bosom of the heavenly Groom, for man to live with all his heart, energies, and possibilities to His account.

Commenting on that forsaking, St. John Chrysostom says: [Tell me what did Peter forsake? ……Was it not just a torn net (6, 11); Yet the Lord opened before him all the houses in the world, stretched before him the land and the sea; all invited him to their possessions; and even sold them all and put the price, not even in his hands, but under his feet]

And commenting on Peter's humility, mixed with work and forsaking, St. Ambrose says: [Peter so marveled before the blessings poured over his person; that the more he gave, the more was his contrition…….. You, as well, should say to Him: "Depart from me, O lord, for I am a sinful man"; to hear the Lord's answer: "Do not fear" …… Confess your sins to Him; …….. Do not hesitate to give Him back what you have; for He Himself granted you what He has …… Just meditate in the love of the Lord who granted man the authority to choose life].

2- CLEANSING A LEPER:

If the Lord Christ, as a Friend of humanity, came to us, who toiled the whole night, and caught nothing; and granted us, by His word, an enormous catch from the depths to fill two boats, namely the spirit and the body, not with material fish, but with an increase of spiritual fruition for the spirit and the body together; Now, we see Him stretch His hand without hesitation to cleanse a leper, whom all fear to touch his body, clothes or possessions, lest they would become unclean, according to the law (Leviticus 13).

In our study of the gospel according to Matthew (Chapter 8), and the gospel according to Mark (Chapter 1), we saw how that leper represents a true portrait of whoever raises a true prayer, to enjoy the touch of the Lord's hand to be cleansed. We also saw the reasons why the Lord sent him to the priest to offer an offering according to the law of Moses; And in our interpretation of the Book of Leviticus (Chapter 14), we saw the true concepts of the rite of cleansing the leper.

According to St. Ambrose, cleansing the leper is a symbol of purifying the believing humanity, whom the Lord did not shy to touch; he says: [The Lord did not cleanse just one individual, but all those to whom He said: "*You are already clean, because of the word which I have spoken to you"* (John 15: 3). If the leper was cleansed by a word from the Lord, despising the word of the Lord is therefore, the leprosy that inflicts the spirit].

And commenting on the Lord touching the leper to cleanse him, St. Ambrose says: [Not that He could not cleanse him without touching him, but to show that He is not a captive of the law; and that he has no fear of catching the disease, that would never happen].

At the same time He touched the leper without fear of getting unclean (according to the law); He seeks from the leper to observe what came in the law after being cleansed, to show that He is not a Breaker of the law.

Commenting on the Lord sending the leper to the priest, in observance of the law, the scholar Tertullian says: [Rejecting every human glorification, the Lord instructed the man not to tell anyone that He has cleansed him; But for the sake of observing the law, He sought from him to obey what came in it ……. He intended to consummate the symbolic prophetic role of the law. …….. Those symbols mean that whoever has been a sinner and was cleansed of defilements by the word of God, is committed to present an offering to God in the temple; namely a prayer of thanksgiving in the church by Jesus Christ, the ecumenical Priest of God the Father.

"A***s a testimony to them just as Moses commanded****"* (14);

By adding these words He shows that He is not a Breaker of the law but to fulfill it (Matthew 5: 17); and proclaims as well that He is the One about whom it was prophesied that He carries our illnesses and weaknesses].

According to St. Ambrose: [The law says that the leper, after being cleansed, is committed to present himself to the priest, not to offer an outer sacrifice, but to offer himself to God a spiritual sacrifice, to have the defilement of his prior works wiped out; and to become dedicated to the Lord as an acceptable sacrifice …… "*I beseech you, therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service"* (Romans 12: 1)].

If the leper resorted, by prayers and supplications to the Lord Christ, to enjoy purification, the Evangelist Luke intends to draw us, every now and then to a life of prayer, as a fountain of the holy life, presenting the Lord Christ, our representative, as a praying Man; when He, Himself, is the Receiver of prayers; saying: "*He Himself often withdrew into the wilderness and pray"* (16)

Even though the multitudes were thirsty to encounter Him; and many of them were healed through getting in touch with Him, or listening to a word out of His mouth, yet He "*He often withdrew to pray*", to proclaim our need for a life of work and meditation, with no separation ……By love, our hearts get wider to work to the account of our brethren; and with the same love, we secretly encounter with God to enjoy His work in us. In other words, there is no separation between work and meditation; between preaching, namely ministry, and worship.

Commenting on the prayers of the Lord Christ, St. Cyprian says: [If He, who is without sin prays, how much more, it is befitting of us – sinners – to pray?! …… If the Lord perpetually prays, watching the whole night with unceasing supplications; how much more it is befitting of us to watch every night in continuous and repeated prayers?!

The Lord does not pray for His own sake; For What will He seek, He, who is without sin?!..... He seeks for the sake of our sins, as He proclaimed to Peter: "*Simon, Simon,…….. I have prayed for you that your faith should not fail"* (Luke 22: 31, 32).

If He toiled, watched, and prayed for our sake, and for the sake of our sins, how much more we are committed to perpetually pray, to supplicate to the Lord Himself, and through Him to bring pleasure to God the Father?! ……The Lord Jesus Chris is our Advocate and Intercessor for the sake of our sins; if we repent our prior sins, and confess them, by which we disobeyed Him; and get preoccupied with walking in His ways, and in the fear of His commandments].

3- HEALING THE PARALYZED:

"Now it happened on a certain day as He was teaching that there were Pharisees and teachers of the law sitting by, who had come out of every town of Galilee, Judea, and Jerusalem" (17).

Seeing a paralyzed man, let down by four men, with his bed through the tiling of the roof into the midst before Jesus, He cut his teaching short to grant forgiveness to the soul of the paralyzed, and healing to his body. In His friendship to us He does not confine His effort to teaching, as is common with many teachers; but He seeks our comfort on the level of the spirit together with the body.

We have previously talked about that paralyzed man, in the gospels according to Matthew (9) and Mark (2); quoting the writings of some fathers. Here I shall talk concisely:

This miracle took place in Capernaum the city of the Lord (Mark 2: 1), its name means (the village of repose or comfort); For, wherever the Lord Christ is, He grants repose to the soul as well as to the body.

To Him came a group of Pharisees and teachers of the law. The word 'Pharisees' is an Aramic term meaning (the separated), who have actually separated themselves from the common people to live in an aristocratic religion characterized by arrogance and haughtiness; a disease that corrupted their life and denied them the true privilege to encounter the Lord Christ, despite the apparent soundness of their doctrine. The teachers of the law, on the other hand, were the Rabbis, who concentrated their care on the 'Telmud', living in a deadly literality.

The Pharisees and the teachers of the law came trusting with arrogance in their religious knowledge and human wisdom. Jesus, though, in their midst, was teaching and healing with power and authority.

"When they could not find how they might bring him in, because of the crowd, they went up on the housetop, and let him down with his bed through the tiling into the midst before Jesus" (19).

The four men are as though, representing the church with all her ranks and members (Bishops, priests, deacons, and congregation); remove the tiling, namely the thoughts of dust, and the earthly worries, to expose the housetop to see the Lord sitting granting His blessings without limit.

Here, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, not able to endure to watch the whole church, represented by those four men, presenting the paralyzed man before Jesus, and not before them; and feeling a collapse of their authority, and a loss of their honor; concentrated their efforts on trying to catch an error in the Lord's teaching. ……. And when He said to the paralyzed man: "*Man, your sins are forgiven you"* (20); they hastened to accuse Him of blasphemy. But the Lord cared, not just to shut them up, but to proclaim Himself, with the hope that they would probably receive and believe in Him.

Having already quoted much of the sayings of the fathers concerning this episode of the paralyzed man, I shall only mention the following points:

+ The Lord Christ saw the faith of those who carried the paralyzed, not that of the paralyzed man himself (for it is possible for someone to be healed on the faith of others). ……. Saying to the paralyzed man: "*Man, your sins are forgiven you",* the Lord intended to address the whole humanity; on account of that all who believe in Christ will have their souls healed of the ailments of sin, and their iniquities are forgiven them. In other words, the Lord intended to say to the paralyzed man: [I have to heal your spirit before your body; lest, if I do otherwise, you, by the strength of your body will walk on your feet, and resume your life of iniquity. Even though, you did not seek the healing of your spirit, yet, I, being God and Lord, can see the ailments of the soul, and how they have brought on you such a terrible illness.

  And as there were a multitude of Pharisees and teachers of the law, and there was a necessity of performing a sign to teach them not to despise the Lord, He performed an unusual exalted thing.

  There, before the Lord was laid a man, so inflicted by paralysis that no physician could cure him; and his own relatives and friend lost hope in getting him healed; but now, with a little glimpse of hope, they hastened to bring him forth to the great Physician who came from high up in heaven. Accepting their faith, that scattered the cloud of doubt, the Lord Christ addressed the paralyzed man by the famous phrase: "Man, your sins are forgiven you".

  Someone may ask: [The paralyzed man was in need of healing his body, why then the Lord proclaimed the forgiveness of his sin?].That was to teach us that God sees the works of man and the way he walks in his life; because it is written: "*For the ways of man are before the eyes of the Lord, and He ponders all his paths"* (Proverb 5: 21). And as God is good, and ,"*desires all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth"* (1 Timothy 2: 4). He often tends to purify the body of whoever commits iniquity and evil, by inflicted it with illness that brings him down, according to the words of the Holy inspiration, saying: "*Be instructed, O Jerusalem, lest My soul depart from you; lest I make you desolate, a land not inhabited"* (Jeremiah 6: 8).

  And in the book of proverbs it is said: "*My son! Do not despise the chastening of the Lord, nor detest His correction; for whom the Lord loves He corrects, just as a father the son in whom he delights"* (Proverb 3: 11). It is, therefore, well that the Lord Christ proclaimed the forgiveness of sins and iniquities, which are all the origin and cause of the illness; and once they are wiped out, the man will be healed of what inflicted him.

"And the scribes and the Pharisees began to reason, saying, 'Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins, but God alone?"(21)

By a divine authority, the Lord Christ proclaimed the forgiveness of the man's sins; but this provoked the wrath of the scribes and the Pharisees, filled with ignorance and envy, to reason among themselves, saying, "Who is this who speaks blasphemies?"……. O, Pharisees, you would not ask such a question if you know the meanings of the Holy Scripture, read the prophesies of the Holy Book, and understood the great and exalted secret of incarnation. But you, instead you hastened to accuse the Lord of speaking blasphemies, and condemned Him to death, according to the law of Moses which says: "*Whoever blasphemes the name of the Lord, shall surely be put to death"* (Leviticus 24: 16)……

"But when Jesus perceived their thoughts, He answered and said to them: 'Why are you reasoning in your hearts?'" (23)

By which He means to say to them:[You, O Pharisees confess that no one but God can forgive sins. But you should know as well, that no one but God can perceive what goes on in the mind of man, can reveal the depths of his heart, and expose his secrets and intentions; according to the words of the prophecy, saying: "*I the Lord search the heart, I test the mind"* (Jeremiah 17: 10); and to which David refers by saying: "*He fashions their hearts individually; He considers all their works"* (Psalm 33: 15). Therefore God who searches the heart and test the mind is He who forgives sins and iniquities.

"But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins ……." (24)

To scatter the cloud of doubt that covers the scribes and the Pharisees, He, not only forgave the paralyzed man his sins, for man cannot perceive the forgiven sins by his eyes, He, as well, commanded the illness to depart from the body of the paralyzed man, who stood on his feet and walked away sound and well; glorifying the greatness of the divine power that healed him, by the great words, he said to the man who was paralyzed:

"I say to you, arise, take up your bed, and go to your house" (25)

+ But, to whom does this verse refer? To himself, or to us? …….It actually refers to the Lord Christ, as well as to us; for the Lord forgives the sins, being the incarnate God the Lord and setter of the Lord; And we have received this exalted power, through crowning man with such a great honor, when the Lord Christ addressed His saintly apostles, saying: "*Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth, will be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth will be*

loosed in heaven" (Matthew 18: 18); and in another location: "*If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained"* (John 20: 23).

(St. Cyril the Great)

+ ***"When He saw their faith……"*** (20)

Great is God who forgives the sins of someone for the sake of the request of others., and accepts the supplications of some for the sake of the forgiveness of the sins pf others.

The minister of God has the right and the daring to ask God on your behalf; and is heard by Him.

Learn, O sick man how to supplicate; and if your sins are great, resort to him who can intercede for you; to the Church that will pray for your sake; and for her sake, the Lord will grant you forgiveness.

(St. Ambrose)

+ Some may claim that the paralyzed man was healed for the sake of the faith of those who carried him; which is wrong; for the words, saying: "*When He saw their faith"*, refer, not only to their faith, but to the faith of the man they carried, Why?!

You may say: [Is it not possible for someone to be healed for the sake of the faith of someone else?]

I believe that this would not be, except in the case if the sick is immature (under age), or too weak to be able to believe.

Do not listen without care to the phrase, saying: "*they let him down with his bred through the tiling into the midst before Jesus"* (19); but rather meditate to how a sick man could endure the trouble of letting him down from the rooftop. …….. You may know that the sick sometimes, protest against the way he is treated on the sickbed, to prefer to endure the pain of illness to them……. But that paralyzed man had the will to be carried out of his house to the market place, in the sight of foreign spectators, which could be mentally painful for him; and when he saw the place where the Lord was, too crowded to enter by its door, he did not object to being hauled to the rooftop, and being let down with his bed though the tiling into the midst before Jesus. He considered it an honor to let many watch him healed.

We realize his faith, as well, from the fact that when he heard the words of the Lord; who said to him, "*Man, your sins are forgiven you";* he did not get offended nor grumbled, or said to the great Physician: [What do you mean by these words? I came to You to heal me from something, and here You are healing me of something else……. He did not utter a word, but left it to the Physician to choose the way He prefers.

(St. John Chrysostom)

+ Why did the Lord heal the paralyzed man right away; but said to him, "Man, your sins are forgiven you?"
He so did with wisdom; to take way the source of the illness before taking away its symptoms.
This was confirmed when the apostle Paul rebuked the Corinthians on a certain sin, saying: "*For this reason, many are weak and sick among you"* (1 Corinthians 11: 30).

By taking away the source of evil, and saying, "Man your sins are forgiven you", the Lord's words were enough to lift his soul up; for nothing could create happiness and restore trust, like being liberated from the inner sufferings; and, where forgiveness is there will be sonhood; ……. That is why we cannot call God the Father, except after having our sins removed in the holy water of baptism; then we can say: "*Father in heaven ……."* (Matthew 6:9).

(St. John Chrysostom)

4-Calling Levi the Tax collector:

Here, the Evangelist presents to us a living side of the friendship of the Lord Christ for humanity; for when He chose His disciples, He drew them from diverse places; sometimes from among the simple fishermen, and other times from among the tax collectors, who were despised by the Jews, accusing them of treason and of working to the account of the Roman empire.

The Lord Christ called 'Levi' the tax collector, who, later on became 'the Evangelist Matthew', with just two word: "Follow Me" (27), but strong and active; for:

"He left all, rose up, and followed Him" (28).

And held a banquet of hospitality for the Lord, to give his fellow tax collectors the chance to taste the sweet encounter with Him

According to St. Jerome, some opponents of Christianity, despised the followers of the Savior, for hastening to follow Him, simply, and without thinking, the moment He calls them. He answers with two things: First that they might have seen the many wonders and sign He performed before He calls them; and the second, that the Lord bears a certain Charisma, being the Lord of all creation; to draw all to Himself.

St. Jerome also noticed that the Evangelist Matthew was the only one who mentioned his name when He was called by the Lord (Matthew 9: 9); while the other Evangelists did not, mentioning only his second name "Levi", in respect to their fellow Evangelist 'Matthew' (Mark 2: 13, 14).

+ Following the principle of Solomon, saying: 'The prudent starts by admonishing himself'; Matthew called himself "a tax collector', to show his readers that no one should despair of the salvation of his own soul, as long as he goes forth to a better life; for he changed from a tax collector to an apostle.

(St. Jerome)

+ 'Levi' was a tax collector who ran after the cursed way of profit; with no limit to his hateful greed; despising the law of justice, to possess what is not his. ……. From among those mean category of men the Lord Christ chose one of them while sunk in a sea of iniquity and evil; called, rescued, and saved him; being said: "*He left all, rose up, and followed Him"* (27, 28). How true was the blessed apostle Paul when he says that "*Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners"* (1 Timothy 1: 15). Do not you see how the Word of God, the oly begotten Son, having taken a body, bring back to Himself the servants and possessions of the devil?!

(St. Cyril the Great)

+ When the Lord Christ chose His own apostles to preach His gospel, He chose them from among the sinners; to show that He came, not to call the righteous, but the sinners to repentance.

(Father Barnabus)

Not enduring to watch the Lord's encounter with the tax collectors and the sinners, the scribes and Pharisees said to His disciples:

"Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners? Jesus answered and said to them: 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick'. 'I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (30, 31).

+ The scribes and Pharisees, believing that, according to the law of Moses: "*it is not right to mix between the holy and the holy and the unholy, and between unclean and clean"* (Leviticus 10: 10), sought from the Lord Christ to keep the law, yet not out of jealousy on the law, bot of envy and malice. They often tried to catch the Lord in their snares, but He told them that, having come, not as a Judge to condemn, but as a Physician to heal; He is committed to approach the sick to heal.

(St. Cyril the Great)

The scholar Tertullian has a beautiful commentary on the words of Christ: "*Those who are well are in no need for a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance"* (30, 31), In the second century AD, certain heresy appeared which despised the body, claiming that it is defiled, and an enemy which has to be destroyed…….. To respond to that heresy, the scholar Tertullian proclaimed that the body, with all what it breached of corruption, yet it is (our relative) (our neighbor), a partner of life of the soul, which we are committed to love, the way we are committed to love our neighbor; par5ticularly that the Lord Christ, having bore our sins in His own body, and blessed its nature in Him. Even though our body has been defiled with the illness of sin, yet the Lord Christ, came, not as a Judge to condemn, but as a Physician to heal both the body and the soul.

From the words of the scholar Tertullian, we can get in touch of the look of the early church toward the body: {The Lord Christ seeks from us to love our neighbor, after our love for Him. Now He practices what He seeks from us, by loving the body (His neighbor) He got attached to, and in several ways, despite its confusion and its weakness, as "*those members of the body which we think to be less honorable, on these we bestow great honor"* (1 Corinthians 2: 23)3). He honors it even
though destroyed; saying: "*For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost"* (Luke19: 10); honors it, even though a sinner, saying: "I wish for the sinner to be saved, not to perish"; and
despite it is condemned, yet "*I wound and heal"* (Deuteronomy 32: 39)

5-PROCLAIMING A NEW WINE:

The Pharisees could not prevail against the Lord concerning His love for humanity. When they protested that He eats together with the tax collectors and sinners, against the law which discerns between the unclean and the clean, He confirmed to them that He is not breaking the law, but fulfills it in the depths of its essence, by His love for humanity and His compassion toward the weak; for He came, not as a Judge to condemn, but as a Physician to heal Now they are attacking His disciples, saying:

"Why do the disciples of John fast often and make prayers, and likewise those of the Pharisees, but yours eat and drink?" (33)

The Lord in His response, not only answered their question, but revealed, as well, His mission, which concentrates in two things:

(1) Having come as a Groom to betroth humanity as His bride, it is, therefore, not an appropriate time for fasting, but for celebrating the presence of the Groom with them; but once He is lifted up to heaven , they will fast and supplicate (34). ….. The goal of worship is not fasting and asceticism , but the enjoyment unity with the heavenly Groom, through fasting and asceticism, if they are offered by the spirit and truth

(2) He did not come to add more burden to the rites of worship, but to take away what is old, and to set what is new; by crucifying the old man, and granting the new spiritual man.

We have already mentioned some comments of the fathers on the response of the Lord Christ, in our interpretation of the gospel according to Matthew (9: 14), and according to Mark (2: 21)

==========

CHAPTER 6

THE FRIENDLY TEACHER

The Greeks perpetually loved to hear something new to satisfy their minds, yet in vain. The Heavenly Teacher, on the other hand, before presenting His new teaching, He presented the new possibilities; by which He lifted man up above the deadly letter, by proclaiming that He is the Lord of the Sabbath; in whom, the believer does not bow to the literality of keeping the Sabbath in a dry way, but carries the power of the Spirit; the way He did when He healed the man with the right withered hand, to set it free for the spiritual work; and the way He chose His twelve disciples to preach and work; Then when He presenting His sermons and teachings.

1- Christ, the Lord of the Sabbath 1 - 5
2- Healing the right hand 6 - 11
3- Calling the disciples 12 - 16
4- His teachings:
   a- A personal talk to those who suffer 17 - 26
   b- A call of exalted love 27 - 46
   c- Need for building on the rock 47 – 49

1- CHRIST, THE LORD OF THE SABBATH:

The three Evangelists: Matthew (12: 1), Mark (2: 43), and Luke , mentioned how the Pharisees created a persistent atmosphere of opposition against the Lord.

"*It happened on the second Sabbath after the first, that He went through the grain fields, and the disciples plucked the heads of grain, and ate them, rubbing them in their hands; And some of the Pharisees said to them: Why are you doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath?"* (1, 2).

Having already talked about that talk in our study of the gospel according to Matthew and Mark, here, we shall only mention the following remarks:

(1) What does the Evangelist Luke mean by the phrase: "***on the second Sabbath after the first"?*** (1). There is controversy in interpreting it among the scholars. We can summarize their views as follows:

   a- By "the first Sabbath", Luke means the Jewish feast of Passover; and by "the second Sabbath", he means the feast of the feast of the firstfruits of wheat harvest, or of the Pentecost; the feast of the weeks (7 weeks from the beginning of the Passover), on the sixth of the month 'Siwan'.
   b- As it came in the Greek version: "***the second Sabbath after the first",*** according to some, he means the second Sabbath after the Passover; and it would consequently mean the first Sabbath after thye feast of the unleavened bread; known as "the Sabbath of Omer".
   c- By "the first Sabbath", he probably means the Sabbath of the first month of the Jewish year; while the second Sabbath will be the Sabbath of the second month; Namely, the first Sabbath is the Sabbath in which the head of the civil year(the month of 'Thishrei, or Thishrin, or Lithanim' comes; while the second Sabbath is that in which the head of the religious year (Nissan) comes.
   d- According to some, the second Sabbath means the First Sabbath that comes in the year preceding to the year of the jubilee.
   e- The most probable view, according to many Christians, is that it is thye second Sabbath directly following the Passover.
   f- According to some scholars who care for the spiritual interpretation, the first Sabbath refers to the Sabbath of the law in its literal Jewish concept; and the second Sabbath here is the new Sabbath, when the Lord Christ brought us forth from the literal physical comfort to the true comfort in Him through His gospel. ……Hence what His disciple did, as He made them pass through the grainfields, refer to bringing them forth into the fields of the books of the Old Testament, to pluck the grains of the symbols and prophesies, and rubbed them by His Holy Spirit; to find in them the spiritual evangelic food, the grantor of the true satisfaction.

We can also say that what the disciples did, was in the name of the whole Church, entering by the Holy Spirit into the divine altar, to receive the grain "the Eucharist", as a divine gift on which she feeds to reach perfection, to be prepared for Jesus Christ, her eternal Groom. ……. According to St. Ambrose: [The Lord Christ led His disciples as though into the field of the present world to enjoy the fruition of the Church which are the work of His Holy Spirit through the apostolic ministry …… For the disciples got hungry for the salvation of men, and intended to enjoy the harvest of the Spirit, something that the Jews rejected.

(2) The question directed by the Pharisees: "***Why are you doing what is not lawful to do on a Sabbath"*** (2), as we said, was not out of jealousy on the law, as much as it was out of criticism, and an attempt to distort the ministry of the Lord Christ. The Lord's response to them was not to convince them, as much as it was to reveal the secrets of the new covenant, in the hope that they might perceive the truth and return to Him. By His answer, the Lord intended to lift them up to the spiritual new covenant instead of the literality of the old law. As according to the apostle Paul: "*Because finding fault with them, He says: 'Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with Israel and with the house of Judah ……In that He says, 'a new covenant", He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away"* (Hebrew 8: 8, 13), This prophecy, the apostle quotes from the book of Jeremiah which they have in their hands (Jeremiah 31: 31).

According to St. Cyril the Great: [We see how those scribes and Pharisees were completely ignorant of that new covenant, on account of that they denied their eyes seeing the Holy Scriptures, while concentrating on searching the heavenly teachings of the Lord Christ, to see if they could find in them something to catch Him with. With the same tendency, they said to the Savior: Do not You how Your disciples do what is not lawful to do on a Sabbath? When the law commands man to have rest in the Sabbath, Your disciples pluck the heads of grain and rub them in their hands to eat. ……Now, tell me, O you who complain, If you break your bread while eating your food in a Sabbath; then why do you blame the others who do what you yourself do? ……. To know how ignorant they were in the Holy Books,

"***Jesus answering them said: 'Have you not even read this, what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with Him? How He went into the house of God, took and ate the showbread, and also gave some to those with Him, which is not lawful for any but the priests to eat?"*** (3, 4)

Even though David did what is not lawful to do, but he, as a prophet and a saint, still has in our souls every honor and reverence. Now, as the law of Moses also commands us to judge truly between and his neighbor, why would you rebuke my disciples with sharp tongues, when they did not do something worse than what David did?

Here we should notice that the showbread mentioned here refer to the bread coming down from heaven, we see on the holy altars of the Churches; and that all the articles of the altar which we use in the secret service are symbols of the exalted divine treasures].

If David was allowed to break the letter of the law and ate the showbread which are lifted up for the priests alone to eat, and new bread are put in its place, according to the Holy Book, saying: "*The priest gave him holy bread, for there was no bread there but the showbread which had been taken from before the Lord, in order to put hot bread in its place on the day when it was taken away"* (1 Samuel 21: 6); for which king Saul was stirred up against the priest Ahimelech, and sent to kill him together with all the priests. Now, the devil is stirring the Pharisees up against the Lord Christ, the Lord of David, for allowing His disciples to enjoy a new bread.

(3) "***And He said to them: The Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath"*** (5)

While intending to accuse Him of breaking the Sabbath, He proclaimed to them that He is "the Son of Man the Lord of the Sabbath"…….. On one aspect He called Himself "the Son of Man'; for "He made the Sabbath for ma, and not man for man; "*not man for the Sabbath"* (Mark 2: 27). If He became a "Son of Man" for the sake of man, even though He is his Lord, how much more it is befitting of the Sabbath to be to serve man?!

The Lord did not despise nor destroyed the law, but He rather lifted it up bu calling Himself "the Lord of the Sabbath". Yes indeed, He is "the Lord of the Sabbath", who is the author of that statute, or that weakly feast; which He set, not to despise nor to break, but to bring us forth into deeper concepts of that feast, through liberating us from the deadly literality of the Sabbath , to the Sunday that bring joy to the soul. The Lord presented Himself "A Sabbath" for us; for He is the secret of our comfort; and our Feast, in whom we enjoy the resurrected life, and the reconciliation with God the Father.

2- HEALING THE WITHERED RIGHT HAND:

In the new Sabbath, the Lord Christ set forth together with His disciples in the midst of the grain fields to grant them the new head of grain, the secret of spiritual satisfaction, to present to them a new concept of the Sabbath, as the secret of inner comfort, and of deep satisfaction that fills the soul through her encounter and unity with God. Now He, in another Sabbath, He entered into the Synagogue, intending to reveal that the Sabbath is not a day of laziness and slothfulness, but a day of comfort through the true spiritual work; hence He encounters the man with the withered right hand, to restore life to it, to be active in the Lord.

"Now it happened on another Sabbath, that He entered the bsynagogue and taught, and a man was there whose right hand was withered. So the scribes and the Pharisees watched Him closely, whether He would heal on the Sabbath, that they might find an accusation against Him" (6, 7).

According to St. Augustine: [While the left hand refers to the material work, the right hand refers to the spiritual work. The man with the withered right hand refers to the Jewish synagogue itself, whose right hand got withered for the spiritual work; as the Sabbath for them turned into a day to cease work, and to practice lifeless literacies …….. The Lord came to take away this withering, and to restore to the Sabbath a new spiritual concept.

In our interpretation of the gospel according to St. Mark (3: 1 – 6), we saw St. Ambrose talks about that man with the withered right hand, as referring to the first Adam who, stretching his hand to the tree in disobedience to his Creator, his hand withered with the sin, and needed the Lord to come to heal it, to practice again the virtuous life., through loving the neighbor and giving justice to the oppressed.. …….. The hand of Jeroboam withered when he intended to raise incense to the idols, and was healed when he prayed (1 kings 13: 4-6); And we saw how St. Cyril the Great, commenting on the miracle, showed how The Lord cared, not only to heal the withered hand, but also to debate with the Pharisees concerning the Sabbath, hoping that they might accept the healing of their withered literal interpretation.

"But He knew their thoughts, and said to the man who had the withered hand: 'Arise and stand here'.; ……. Then Jesus said to them: 'I will ask you one thing: Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy?!……. and when He had looked around at them all, He said to the man: 'Stretch out your hand; and he did so, and his hand was restored as whole as the other" (8 -10)

The Lord looked at them while moaning inside inside for the sake of the hardness of their hearts; for instead of caring for the healing the withered hand of their brother, to enjoy again the active life, they cared to criticize, and to watch the Lord closely, to see whether He would heal on a Sabbath that they might find something to accuse Him…… even after the healing of the man's hand, instead of rejoicing with him,

They were filled with rage, and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus" (11)

According to St. Cyril the great; [Was the miracle not enough to sow the spirit of faith in their hearts?!..... They saw how the Lord Christ works by a divine authority, and heals the man by an exalted power; and yet, they still retained the hardness of their hearts because of envy and malice].

3- CALLING THE DISCIPLES:

If the Lord Christ came as a Friend to humanity, a friendship not set upon mere emotion, but through active love. …….. We saw Him bring us into the grain fields to present Himself as the new Head of grain, delivered on the cross; to partake of as the secret of our satisfaction in the Sabbath of the true comfort…….. We also saw Him bring us to His sanctuaries (the synagogue), being the Lord of the Sabbath, to heal our withered right hand, to turn our life away from the hard letter of the law, to the evangelic life working in, and by Him……. Now we see Him, in our name, and to our account,

"go out to the mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God" (12).

Being our Friend, He proclaims to us that "prayer" is the way to friendship, and to opening our hearts wide to the Lord of heaven. In the introduction to this book we said that it is the book of "the divine friendship", set upon prayer; hence the Lord shows Himself as our Teacher of prayer, not through commandments to practice fervently the perpetual prayer, but through Him going, as well, to many locations to pray. …… We saw the difference between the prayer of Him, who is without sin, and our prayers being sinners. On account of that He prays and intercedes by His blood for the forgiveness of our sins (See the interpretation of Luke 5: 16).

Commenting on the phrase said by the Evangelist Luke: "*He went to the mountain to pray"* (12), St. Cyril the Great said: [All what the Lord Christ did was for our edification, and for the benefit of the believers in His name. He did everything to present to us an exalted example of the spiritual life, to worship Him by a true worship.

Now, let us study the living example presented by the Lord Christ to us, when we intend to supplicate to the High God concerning some issue; We should pray in secret, away from anyone, according to the Lord's command, saying: "*When you pray, go into your*

room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place" (Mathew 6: 6). The goal of prayer is not to seek glory and honor; but to stand "*lifting up holy hands"* (1 Timothy 2: 8); to ascend up to heaven, to the dwelling place of God, and to find for ourselves a place away from the chaos, worries, and troubles of the world; …….. and to do all that with pleasure, and not with labor and anxiety; with longing, jealousy, and perseverance, worthy of commendation and admiration; on account of that you read in the Holy Books, how the Lord Christ, despite the fact that He is begotten of God the Father; not only prayed, but kept on praying the whole night …… and humbled Himself to the extent of emptying Himself on many aspects, to become our brother who is like us in everything except for sin. Christ partook of our human nature, had compassion on us; did not despise us, nor our nature, but took our likeness over Himself to make us follow His lead, and imitate Him].

According to St. Ambrose: [Not everyone who prays can climb the mountains; as there is prayer that may be counted as sin (Psalm 109: 7). Whoever learns the sound prayer will exalt above the earthly riches to the heavenly, and keeps on climbing until he reaches the top of the high seclusion. Whereas whoever cares for the riches of the world, cannot climb the mountains, but would instead desire the lowly things that belong to his neighbor. Whoever looks up to the company of God, will seek God to ascend; ……..the strong souls climb the mountains. The prophet does not counsel anybody to climb the mountains, but says: "*Get up on the high mountain, O Jerusalem, you who bring good tidings, lift up your voice with strength"* (Isaiah 40:9) Climbing the mountains is not by feet, but by the exalted works. ……. Following Christ, you yourself will be one of the mountains surrounding you (Psalm 125: 2)}. St, Ambrose goes on to say: [When the Lord prays, He seeks nothing for Himself, but for our sake; He is our Intercessor; …… Do not ever assume that Christ out of weakness, seeks to get something which He cannot get on His own; for He is the source of every authority …….. But He conforms us by His role model in virtue …… "*We have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the Righteous"* (1 John 2:1) who intercedes for our sins; He therefore seeks, not out of weakness but out of love; ……. He spent the whole night in prayer, to give you an example to follow]……

Then, in the daylight, He called the twelve disciples; In whose choice we can notice the following:

(1) According to St. Augustine: [He chose the disciples of illiterate and of lowly origin; so that when they become great and practice great works, it would be through His dwelling and working in them. The apostle Paul says: "*God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise; and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not to bring to nothing the things that are; that no flesh should glory in His presence"* (1 Corinthians 2: 27 – 29)

He chose them, as well, from among the sinners, to make them have compassion on their sinful brethren

(2) "*You did not choose Me, but I chose you, and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He will give you"* (John 15: 16). By hearing those words, the disciples felt that they had no favor in being chosen, but the favor refers to God who chose them …….. He is, therefore, committed to care for them, to support them, and by His Spirit to get fruition in them to fulfill His mission; yet not with negativity on their part, but they have to respond to the work of His grace, to work by, in Him, and to His account. This is confirmed by the apostle Paul who perceived that he was separated for work while still in his mother's womb (Galatians 1: 15); and is therefore committed to the divine work, saying: "*We then, as workers together with Him also plead with you not to receive the grace of God in vain"* 2 Corinthians 6: 1).

Commenting on the choice of the disciples, St. Cyril the Great says: [The disciples, taking power from Christ, the whole world marveled on their works. Yet, here we notice how the Evangelist Luke, in humility and meekness, did not say that the disciple were elected, but simply mentioned their names, to draw attention to that no one should attempt to force himself upon ministry. And in this concern, the apostle Paul says: "*No man takes this honor to himself, but he who is called by God, just as Aaron was"* (Hebrew 5: 4)…… Even though the saintly apostles were separated by name by God for this exalted mission, yet, some people, every now and then, foolishly dare to force themselves among the apostles, and take upon themselves a name they were not given; to which the apostle Paul referred, saying: "*For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore, it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into minister of righteousness"* (2 Corinthians 11: 13, 14).

(3) He mentioned the names of the twelve disciples, **two by two**, to confirm the life of fellowship between them. For the secret of their power lies in the Lord Christ (the true love) transfigured in their life, in their inner personal life, as well as in the living life of fellowship.

We often said that the figure 2 refers to "love, which makes the two one"; in a mission of love that unifies the hearts in the Lord, and embraces all souls together through the reconciliation with God the Father in His Son, by His Holt Spirit.

(4) The following are the names of the twelve disciples and their meaning:

"Simon", meaning (the Listener) or (the Obedient). Whom the Lord Christ called "**Peter'**, meaning (the Rock), being the first to proclaim the faith in the Lord Christ the Son of God.

"**Andrews**", meaning (the Serious), (the Strong), or (the Mighty).

"**James"**, meaning (the Chaser) or (the Striver)

"**John",** meaning (God shows compassion), or (God grants grace).

"Philip", meaning (Mouth of the lamp).

"Bartholomew", meaning (Son of the Mower).

"Matthew", meaning (A Grant), or (A Gift)

"**Thomas",** meaning (The Twin).

"**Judas",** meaning (Thanks-giver) or (The confessor)

We have already mentioned some comments by the fathers in this concern, in our study of the gospel according to the Evangelist Mark (3: 15).

4- HIS TEACHINGS:

If, in His friendship, the Lord Christ brought us forth into the grain fields to satisfy us by Himself; into His sanctuaries (the synagogue) to heal our right hand for the spiritual work; and chose the disciples to proclaim the heavenly reconciliation; Now, He approaches us as a Friendly Teacher, to talk to us about His heavenly law by which to live.

A- **A personal talk to those who suffer:**

As a Friendly Teacher, He comes down to us in the midst of our suffering, to talk to us a practical and an actual talk, and to support us in our labor; According to the Evangelist:

"***He came down with them and stood on a level place with a crowd of His disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea and Jerusalem, and from the seacoast of Tyre and Sidon, who came to hear Him and be healed of their diseases, as well as those who were tormented with unclean spirits. And they were healed. And the whole multitude sought to touch Him, for power went out of Him and healed them all"*** **(6: 17 – 19).**

If in His prayer all night long, the Lord went up the mountain; for no one could perceive the secret of the unique unity between God the Father and God the Son; …….Yet, He came down to the plain to encounter with His disciples, the Jews, and the Gentiles; those who came to hear Him, and to touch Him for power went out from Him and healed them all…….By that the Lord discipled His ministers; who, even though it was befitting of them to climb the high mountains to enter with God into a deep secret spiritual fellowship, yet, as servants of the people, and workers to the account of humanity, they have to go down to comfort them.

If our Lord Christ, as a Friendly Teacher, came to grant power to whoever touch Him, to grant exalted gifts to the suffering souls who remained on the plains, unable to climb the high mountains to encounter Him. According to St. Ambrose: [Meditate in every word …… in how He came down to the multitude; for where could the multitude see Him except on the plains. For, as the multitudes could not follow Him up to the heights, nor climb to the tops of mountains; He Himself comes down to the plains, where the weak and to the sick could be healed, to grow in strength gradually, until they are able to climb the mountains…… The Lord comes down to heal our wounds, to make us partake of His nature by uniting with us].

Now, having granted power to those who touched Him to lift them up from the plains to the tops of mountains of virtue; He started to talk to them a personal talk about "the blessing of sufferings", the Evangelist says:

"He lifted up His eyes toward His disciples, and said: 'Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God'"**(20)**

To encounter the people He came down to the plains; but when He talks, He lifted up His eyes toward His disciples to raise their insight with Him toward heaven. He blessed the poor, not to take away from them their temporal deprivation or their suffering, but to lift them up in the midst of their sufferings to His divine kingdom. Our Friend came suffering to live among those who suffer, to carry them up to the fellowship of His glories.

He presents a personal beatitude to His listeners by saying: "*Blessed are you ……",* describing them as poor, hungry, weeping, hated by men, and unjustly persecuted by them ……Then He gives woes to those who carry contradictory features: namely to those who are rich, who are full, who laugh now, and who are commended by all men. We have already spoken about those blessings in our study of the gospel according to St. Matthew (5: 2 – 12); in which we would notice the following points:

1- He started by the blessings and not by the woes. In the blessings, He addresses His talk to His listeners; whereas He addresses the woes in the absent tense. By that, the Lord Christ the true Friendly Teacher presents a living portrait of the sound teaching, intended to encourage the listeners, and to provide them with hope; assuming that His listeners would obey Him to enjoy His divine blessings; And when He warns, He assumes that they still do not do wrong …….He is positive n His teaching.

Carrying the Spirit of his Lord, the apostle Paul in his epistles calls those to whom he writes "saints, chosen, and called for the kingdom, etc"……. Then after such abundance of encouragement, he starts rebuking them, firmly, but without hurting their feelings.

2- Commenting on the divine saying: "*Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God"* (20), St. Cyril the Great says: [Those are the words uttered by the Savior as He opened before His disciples the treasures of the new covenant, and led them along the way of the gospel, as they were about to go proclaiming the holy mission…….

We want now to know who are they whom He called "poor", and whom He promised the kingdom of God. According to Matthew (5: 3); he is the poor in spirit, whoever is humble, and not puffed up; he who has a meek heart, and a mind far from pride and boasting, and free from the iniquity of selfishness.

Such a person is worthy of commendation, on account of that he is a friend of God, described by the prophet Isaiah as: "*On this one will I look, on him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My words"* (Isaiah 66: 2); and by the prophet David says: "*A broken and a contrite heart – these O God, You will not despise"* (Psalm 51:17); and the Lord Himself says: "*Learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart"* (Matthew 11: 29).

In the verse before us we notice that it promises the poor to have every heavenly blessing, yet without adding the words (in Spirit), as it is in the other gospels. But we should Know that the Evangelists do not contradict one another, but share the narration among themselves; sometimes they all mention the same episode whole; and other times one of them mentions what the other omitted; to provide the believers in Christ with everything that would edify and renew the disciples.

In the verse before us then, we see that Christ, by "*the poor in spirit*" means him who is worthy of blessings and of paradise, who does not care for the riches and the love of money, who despises covetousness and hateful gifts; and who goes up above all the vain appearances of life.

To guide us to the way of sound principles, the wise St. Paul says: *"Let your conduct be without covetousness"* (Hebrew 13: 5); then adds: "*having food and clothing, with these we shall be content"* (1 Timothy 6: 8); For whoever wishes for the redemption and salvation of Christ, will despise the mortal riches, and girdle his loins with the exalted immortal works. ……Yet by despising the riches, we do not mean to defame the people who have an abundance of riches, but we mean those who throw themselves wholly on the love of money, and desire it with their heart, soul, and mind; whom the Savior addressed by saying: "*Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth"* (Matthew 6: 19).

According to St. Ambrose: [All the Evangelists began their beatitudes by this verse, for it is the first in order, and the mother of all the other virtues. By despising the possessions of this life, we come to be worthy of the eternal possessions; whereas by becoming captives of the desires of the world, it would be impossible to float above them]. And he also says: [Not all the poor are blessed; for there are good and evil poor people; ……Blessed is he who is poor in sin and iniquities, in whom the prince of this world has no place (John 14: 3); …….Bless is the poor who likens his Lord who even though rich, has become poor for our sake (2 Corinthians 8:9)].

According to St. John El-Tabaisy: [Unless we begins by deprivation, we would not be able to acquire the sound spirit, as long as we have some obstacles in our souls. Namely man cannot acquire the love of God, if the love of possession is still in him; for it is written: "*Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me"* (Mark 8: 35). Man cannot bear the cross without denying the world; Truth would not hold fast in him, unless he cuts off from his conscience the love of wealth. ……. Do not feel sorrow, O man, when you are poor and needy, hungry and naked for the sake of God, for your hope for comfort is in the kingdom; Do not be dismayed, but rejoice and be glad by the hope prepared for you]

According to St. Chrysostom, counting poverty or humility, as being the head of every virtue, he says: [It is the golden altar, the spiritual place of the sacrifice; for "*The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit"* (Psalm 51: 17). Humility is the father of wisdom; if man has it, he would have all the rest of virtues].

3-"Blessed are you who hunger now, for you shall be filled" (21)

+ In Matthew it came as: "*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled"* (5: 6). whereas in Luke it came as: *Blessed are you who hunger now, for you shall be filled"* (21).. It is certain that the hungry and thirsty for the righteousness carry out a great and honorable work; for they diligently seek after godliness and goodness the way they do after food and drink.

  By the same verse, he meant to bless whoever optionally seeks the life of poverty and need without complaining; for such beatitude works on growing their mind and increasing their will, to walk along the sound apostolic life, to care, not for the vain profit; nor for silver and gold, nor for rich attire; they have nothing but the least of food that only satisfy the minimum of their need.

  Caring for the eternal life instead of the one in the world, and trusting in the promise of the Lord Christ, such people will never despair; for The Lord openly proclaims that they will be satisfied with what He opens for them of the spiritual and mental treasures.

  (St. Cyril the Great)

+ Whenever man is inflicted with a serious illness, he will not feel hungry; for pain swallows hunger! …… Now what is this hunger for the righteousness? And what are the goods for which the righteous hunger? Are they not those about which is written: "*I have been young, and now am old; yes I have not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his descendants begging bread"* (Psalm 37: 25).
  Whoever feels hunger, would wish for his strength to grow, and for his virtue to be stronger.

  (St. Ambrose)

4-"Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh" (21)

As the Lord Christ seeks from us to weep and shed tears, the church, from the beginning was preoccupied with the practice of a life of true repentance with unceasing tears; yet with wisdom and discernment, without loss of the inner joy, through hope and exalted peace. We will, therefore not marvel to see St. Clement of Alexandria, exhort us to shed tears, saying:[It is good to weep and feel sorrow for the sake of justice, by which we would testify to the most amazing of statutes]; He confirms our commitment not to exaggerate in weeping as well as in laughing. By the same view we hear St. Cyril the Great tell us about the beatitude given by the Lord Christ to those who weep, to have the enjoyment of the life of joy; yet not all those who weep, for many unbelievers weep out of grief and sorrow.

Let us then weep and shed tears, yet with wisdom, and hope for the sake of our salvation and the salvation of our brethren. And let our weeping be before the Lord Himself, so that He would fill us with the comfort of His Holy Spirit.

+ It is befitting of you to weep on the world, but to rejoice in the Lord; to weep in repentance, and to rejoice for grace; hence Paul, the teacher of the Gentiles counsels us "*to rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep"* (Romans 12: 15)

+ Who will acquire great joy, but him who often weeps; as though he gets the grace of the glory to come as a price of his tears.

  (St. Ambrose)

+ "*There is "time to weep and time to laugh"* (Ecclesiastes 3: 4)*."*

  The time of weeping is that of suffering, according to the words of the Lord: "*Most assuredly I say to you that you will weep and lament"* (John 16: 20) whereas laughing concerns the resurrection; "Sorrow will turn into joy" (John 16: 20).

  (Father Dionesius of Alexandria)

+ The present time is the valley of tears; This world is the place of sorrow and not of joy; …….. The world to come is that of joy; whereas, it is now the arena of wrestling and endurance.

+ In the present world, there is no eternal joy, but what will soon come to an end.

+ He who does not weep in the present world, will shed tears in the life to come.

(St. Jerome)

+ The extended prayer, and the dense tears, draw the mercy of God.

+ It is only weeping that leads to the blessed laughing.

+ Intending to show in Himself all the beatitudes for those who weep now, Jesus Himself wept, to set the good foundation of that beatitude.

(The scholar Origen)

+ In his eulogy of St. Gregory, Bishop of Nyssa said: [Whenever I remember the flood of his tears, I, myself, start to weep; fr it is impossible for me to cross over the sea of his tears with dry eyes. No day nor night, or even a moment however short, in which his watching eyes would not appear full of tears. He sometimes weeps for the sake of the general misery and foolishness in which all fall; and other times for the sake of individual transgressions. You will find him weep and mourn, not only when he speaks about repentance, ethics, and the ordinance of life; but even during prayers of praise and thanksgiving.

(St. Ephraim the Syrian)

+ The soul, dead through sin, needs sorrow, weeping, tears, and bitter sighs on the evil which pushed her over to perdition……

Wail, weep, feel sorrow; to bring the soul back to God.

If you think of how a mother would suffer if she loses her son to death, and how she wails on the departure of her beloved. you will realize that sorrow should be greater for man who is separated by sin from God, to lose his goodness and his image, beloved by God, for whom the soul is more dear than all the rest of His creation. ……..If you do not think, O sinner, that by sin, the soul dies, you should rather feel sorrow for the sake of God who feels sorrow for you! ……..Your soul is dead through iniquity; shed tears to raise it up; to bring joy to God by the resurrection of your soul.

(St. (Mar) Ephraim the Syrian)

We wish, as well, to make it clear that, while weeping in this world on our sins, this weeping does not mean a loss of hope, but, according to St. (Mar) Ephraim the Syrian, [As we truly repent, we are forgiven, for God loves us; yet we should perpetually remember those sins, lest we would fall into them again. Even though they are completely forgiven, yet we should say together with the psalmist: "*MY sin is always before me"* (Psalm 51:3). Father Pavnotius, disciple of St. Maccari, often quotes the great saint saying: [When I was a little child I used to eat together with the other children the few figs they steal; and when a fig fell from them while running, I picked it up and ate. Whenever I remember that I weep].

Our weeping should be, not only on our own sins, but on those of the others, as well. …….. On a question if man is allowed to laugh, St. Basil the Greats said: [I do not understand how a good Christian can ever laugh, when he always sees how many bring sorrow to God by breaking the law, and approach death through sin!]. …….And in his sermon on Jolita the martyr, he said: [Whenever you see your brother mourn his sins, weep together with him. For through your hot tears on the sins of the others, you, yourself will be healed. That is the condition of him who says: "*Indignation has taken hold of me because of the wicked who forsake Your law"* (Psalm 119: 53).

And according to St. John Chrysostom: [Let us weep on them, not one day or two, but our whole life].

To provide us with practical training to weep and to enjoy shedding tears, St. John El-Tabaisy said: [Remember the passion of Christ, bring your soul into account, remember the ultimate judgment, death, etc.). Seek tears from God]. …… Of his words: [Tears used to come easily to our blessed fathers during prayers, because they perpetually thought about the passion of the Lord], and, [Bring your soul into account, how often you watched the nights for her sake (for the sake of tears); or how many works you presented to God to seek from Him the sorrow of tears, which are a talent given by God according to the strife of him who seeks it] .

+ ***"Blessed are you, when men hate you, and when they exclude you"*** (22)

Being a true Friend who entered into our life, and partook of our sufferings, we do not see in the teachings of the Lord shining philosophical words, but an experience of life, He presents to us in the midst of our tribulations. He dwelt among us as poor; and appeared as hungry and thirsty; He wept to bless the poor, the hungry, and those who weep. And now, He accepts to be rejected by men, to give those hated and excluded a place in Him.

If poverty in spirit, or humility, is the head of every virtue, and the beginning of every true beatitude; the endurance of hate, reproach, and exclusion by men, with a heart wide with love, for the sake of the kingdom of God, would be the ultimate end of the beatitudes; for in it the believer would reach the true spiritual maturation. In other words, what the Word of God seeks of us in our endurance of the others with joy, is the enjoyment of having the features of the Lord Christ, suffering for the sake of His enemies; to be truly counted as mature members of His body……St. Jerome summarized the beatitudes in the Old and the New testaments in a single phrase: [Blessed – not every man – but he who reaches the perfection of maturity in Christ].

+ "*Blessed are you, when men hate you"* (22).

Here, the Lord told the apostles what to expect prepared for them by the devil, of tribulations and persecution while teaching people. And the Evangelist, through the way of prophecy, describes the horrible woes that will come upon the apostles while proclaiming the message of the Redeemer; while counseling the Jews to reject the literal worship of the law, to be clothed by the attire of the ideal life; and while illuminating the way of truth for the pagans, to make them forsake the life of iniquity and fornication.

But the enemy of virtue, accepting no counsel nor guidance, kindles an open war against the counselor and the guide. And to make the apostles aware of what awaits them while preaching the Word of the gospel, lest they might despair or be shaken, in case they are persecuted by men, and hated by the wicked for their counsel and guidance, the Lord Christ told them ahead their exalted spiritual portion; and clothed them with the attire of heavenly gladness. He said to them that all what the wicked could do to them of scattering, deprivation, exile, reproach, and hate, are counted as nothing, because, through their endurance of all those tribulations and persecution, they will be counted worthy of the enjoyment of spiritual comfort. Then the Lord added that going through persecution is nothing new, for the prophets and apostles have for long suffered it before them. They have been murdered, sawed, and struck by the edge of the sword, etc. for the sake of the conquest of truth and justice; then were crowned by the crowns of heaven, and had fellowship of the glory of the saints.

(St. Cyril the Great)

+ Whoever intends to liken the Lord, has to be meek and tranquil, as much as is possible for man, and to endure with a wide heart what would disturb him by the others.

In case you face a heavy un-endurable reproach, and when you are overridden by anger and by any tendency for foolish reaction, just remember the meekness of Christ, to get, through your enemy, a great benefit; for by your meekness you may make him good.

(St. John Chrysostom)

+ Pray for me to God to grant me the great grace to offer sacrifices to Him, as long as the altar is prepared. ……. In gathering together, sing with love a song of thanksgiving to God the Father by His Son Jesus Christ.

I seek of you not to show me compassion out of place; Allow me to become food for the vicious beasts, through which I would be granted the good fortune to reach to God…… Let me be ground by the fangs of beasts to leave nothing of my body, to become a tomb for me, to cause no one the trouble to bury me. ,…… For, once my body is not seen by the world, I shall be truly a disciple of Christ…… Supplicate to Christ for my sake, that through such a way, I would be prepared to be a sacrifice for God.

(Agnatius the Theophorus the martyr)

6-After presenting the four blessings, He presented the four woes which concern the rich, the full, those who laugh now, and those of whom all men speak well (24 – 26).

By the rich, He undoubtedly means those who trust in their wealth, to have their eyes blinded to behold God and their brethren……. By the satisfied, He means those who have become so full to feel that they are in no more need for God, and seek nothing from Him; ……And by those who laugh, He means those whom the world with all its seductions distract them away from the way of repentance;…… And by those of whom all men speak well, He means those who seek the vain glory, and not the inner hidden glory.

Concerning "the rich", according to St. Ambrose: [Even though an abundance of wealth includes many calls toward evil, it probably includes, as well, a call to virtue. Virtue, indeed does not need an abundance of wealth, for the few offered by the poor is better than the plenty offered by the rich. ……..Yet God does not condemn him who possess wealth, but condemns him who misuses it].

St. Ambrose also believes that the rich who fall under curse, are the Jews and the philosophers: the Jews, who got rich with the symbols, the prophesies, and the promises, yet rejected the simplicity of faith…….. And the philosophers who got rich with the human philosophies, to reject faith altogether.

In his book "Who is the rich who will be saved?", St. Clement of Alexandria, proclaimed the Christian concept of richness; in that wealth represents a talent which should be (kindled) to the account of the Kingdom of God……. And with the same view, St. John Chrysostom confirmed in several of his articles, that richness, in itself, is neither good nor evil; but could be used by man for righteousness or for evil……. And St. Cyril the Great confirms, that among the rich are those who have compassion on the poor, and have mercy on the like of Lazarus, to gain the crown of heaven; through keeping the divine commandment: "*I say to you, make friends for yourselves by unrighteous mammon, that when you fail, they may receive you into an everlasting home"* (Luke 16: 9)

By "the full" He means those like the one to whom is said: "*Because you say: I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing – and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked --I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire that you may be rich, and white garment that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed, and anoint your eye with eye salve, that you may see"* (Revelation 3: 17, 18). Those who are described as "full', assume that they are rich, trust in themselves and their own possibilities, and not in the Word of God, the pure Gold that grant true fullness; nor on the Lord Christ Himself, whom it is befitting of us to put on, to cover our weakness and shame, by His free righteousness, nor in the Holy Spirit who opens up the inner insight.

By "those who laugh now", He means those who licentiously walk in life; not caring for the salvation of their souls, nor for their eternal inheritance; who spend their days in fun, instead of seriously practicing repentance.

Finally, by "those of whom all men speak well", He means those who, seeking to be commended by men, enslave themselves to them and not to God; seek to please men at the expense of the truth; and rejoice to hear a word of temporal commendation, instead of the eternal glory.

B- **A call of exalted love:**

Intending to be our Friend, to lift us up to enjoy the beatitudes, and to beware of the woes; He brings us forth into His feature of "the exalted love", to make love an inner flood springing in our depths; to love even our enemies; to love by work, and not by words; hence His commandments so came:

"But I say to you who hear: Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you; and pray for those who spitefully use you" (27, 28)

He seeks from us to have an abundance of love spring inside us, without waiting for a payback; saying: "*Love your enemy";* and pay his enmity back with love. Such love is translated into a work of mercy: "*Do good to those who hate you";* and, through a holy and blessed life, that blesses everyone and curses no one: *"Bless those who curse you".* Mixing with worship, we should desire the salvation of those who "*spitefully use us",* and to have their fellowship with us in glory, to pray for their sake to repent. In other words: the commandment of love came bound with our whole being in the Lord; deep in the soul, translated into behavior and work; and mixed with the holy life, and bound to our worship.

+ "***Love your enemies"*** (27)

  According to the wise Paul, true in what he writes: "*If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation"* (2 Corinthians 5: 17) For all things are renewed in, and by Christ. Notice how the life of those apostles, chosen by Christ to spread the message of salvation over the whole world; is renewed. Notice how the Lord commands them to pay the wrong doing, the plots, and the snares of their enemies, who know no mercy or compassion, back with goodness;……Notice how He sought from His apostles not to avenge the evil done against them, so as not to hinder the distribution of the Word; ……..how He counseled them to control their minds by perseverance and tranquility; ……how to endure with pleasure every harm done to them, …….to follow the lead of Jesus Christ their highest role model in perseverance and forgiveness; who, being scoffed by the Jews, young and old, He preyed to God the Father, saying: "*Father, Forgive them, for they do not know what they do"* (Luke 23: 34) and that of blessed Steven, who while being stoned to death, knelt on the ground, and cried out in a loud voice, saying: *"Lord, Do not charge them with this sin"* (Acts 7: 60); and, in this concern, the wise Paul says: *"Being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we endure"* (1 Corinthians 4: 12)

  The warning of the Lord Christ was therefore necessary for the holy apostles, and of benefit for us believers, as well, to live in uprightness; beside having a deep philosophical meaning, on account of what we have in us of stirred-up psychological tendencies, that make it rough to walk according to the warnings of the Lord. But the Lord made us understand the necessity of

fighting against these corrupt tendencies, and discerned between those who obey His word, and those who do not; saying: *I say to you, who listen"*; And the apostle Peter adds, saying about the great perseverance and longsuffering of the Lord Christ: "*Who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously"* (1 Peter 2: 23).

Some of you may object, saying that Christ is God, while I am a weak human being, with unsound mind, and has of the psychological tendencies what would stand against attempts to quench the spirit of evil covetousness. But be sure, O man, that God did not deprive you of the spirit of His compassion and love; for He is beside you, and even in you by His Holy Spirit; we are His dwelling place; He dwells in the souls of His beloved; He encourages you by His right hand, to keep you from being shaken; holds you fast so as not to fall. Therefore, "*Do not overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good"* (Romans 12: 21).

(St. Cyril the Great)

+ As much as possible, do not have an enemy; and in case you have someone who hates you, do not be grieved, for they hated Your Lord before you.

You can turn the hate of your enemy into benefit; for because of him, you will have an abundance of God's love; and because your feeling sorry for him, you will have much benefit; because the commandment of your Lord will be fulfilled in him. In case your enemy causes you harm, and you cannot have benefit of his hate, you should recognize your weakness, and search for the reason why you could not have benefit out of his hate; for how would your truth with your Lord could be known, if you have nothing in you that contradict with your comfort; to seem like someone without strife.

(St, John El-Tabaisy)

+ Remember the perseverance of that meek lamb, even though he was without sin; Remember how He endured to be reviled, and stricken, even to death.

(St. Parsonovius)

+ There are other ways to pay evil back with evil; not only by works, but also by words and by intention. Man, can intentionally disturb his brother through his body movements, or his looks

(St. Dorotheos)

"To him who strikes you on the one cheek, offer the other also; and from him who takes away your cloak, do not withhold your tunic either. Give to everyone who asks of you, and from him who takes away your goods, do not ask them back" (29, 30).

We have already, in our interpretation of the gospel according to St. Matthew (5: 39- 42), studied these commandments that proclaim the practical translation of the energies of love; that in case someone is inflicted in his temporal honor (is struck on the cheek), or in his personal possessions like his cloak, he would be ready to endure more and more, for the sake of gaining his brother who has become his enemy. And on another aspect, bearing the feature of his Lord, he will be a lover of giving, more than of taking; he will give him who asks him; and he who borrows something from him, he will not ask them back. The goal of these commandments, according to the commentaries of the fathers is two things: Gaining the other, and practicing the giving.

+ It is befitting of the righteous and the godly man to be always ready to endure harm with perseverance from those, of whom he intends to become good; so that the number of the good people would increase, instead of being, himself, added to the number of the wicked, when he intends to avenge himself against those who cause him harm.

(St. Augustine)

+ It is befitting of us not to wrestle against the others, nor to desire to be like the wicked; The Lord exhorts us to treat the others with perseverance and compassion, rather than with the love of evil and reproach.

(St. Justin)

+ God's gladness is truly in giving.

(St. Clement of Alexandria)

The essence of these commandments is love, by which one will not only disregard his stricken cheek, but, with wide heart, would be ready to give the other cheek as well, to gain his brother to the account of the eternal kingdom; and not only give away his cloak, but by his own free will not withhold his tunic as well. He would be so loving giving, that he would not seek the return of the debt, lest that would probably cause embarrassment to his brother. …….According to St. Augustine: [Our Lord exhorts His followers not to resort to the civil courts of justice in their temporal disputes against their brethren].

"And just as you want men to do to you, you also do to them likewise" (31)

That is the practical love, by which man departs from the 'ego', loves his neighbor as he loves himself, desires for him what he

desires for himself; and "*just as he wants men to do to him, he also does to them likewise"*

Commenting on this verse, St. Cyril the Great says: [Most probably, the saintly apostles, thought within themselves, that it would be difficult for them to put those commandments into action. Perceiving their thoughts, the Lord Christ, resorting to the instinct of self-love to judge between men, sought from each of them to do to the others what he himself wishes them to do to him. If we want the others to treat us with compassion and love, we are committed to treat them likewise. The prophet Jeremiah prophesied that there will be time when the believers will not need written commands, on account of that those teachings would be inscribed on their hearts and minds; saying: "*I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts"* (Jeremiah 31: 33).

Through the mature love, He seeks from us not to pay our neighbors back with like treatment; but to present to them what we desires for ourselves, regardless of what they do to us…….. When we love for God's sake, namely for love itself; Love would become our nature ……; saying:

"If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you; for even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you, for even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you hope to receive back, what credit is that to you? For even sinners lend to sinners to receive as much back" (32 – 34)

It is as though He says to them: [Do not consider my commandments difficult to put into practice; for I present what is befitting of you as children of the kingdom. While I seek of you to lead a virtuous life, exalted above the human nature; I shall be working with, and in you ……..Then He adds:

"***Your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High"*** (35).

The world, when it loves seeks a like reward in the least; Whereas for you, your reward will be great; you will be sons of the Most High; which commits you to be like your heavenly Father.

Therefore be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful" (36)

+ Nothing can make us like God except doing good (be merciful)

+ God the Father and His Son Jesus are the teachers

+ Let us come, together with our children, and all who belong to us, to the school of mercy; which man should learn above anything else…….. Let us count ourselves as not living, if we still not show mercy.

(St. John Chrysostom)

+ This is the work of God ……. He created heaven, earth, and seas; which are great achievements, befitting of His wisdom; but nothing of them have the authority to draw the human nature to Him, like His mercy and love for men.

(St. John Chrysostom)

+ Love (Mercy), the most exalted feature, which protects whoever practices it, is dear to God, stands always beside Him, to intercede with Him for the sake of those who seek it, if we practice it the right way!

It intercedes even for those who hate. Great is its authority, even concerning those who sin.

It loosens the shackles; scatters the darkness, quenches the fire, kills the maggots, and appeases the grinding of teeth.

Before her, the gates of heaven will surely open; As a queen she will enter, and no gate-keeper will dare stand in her way, or even asks who she is; but all will readily receive her.

So it will be for the mercy; a true queen, which makes men like God; has golden wings, by which she flies, bringing pleasure to the angels.

(St. John Chrysostom)

If mercy makes us like the merciful God Himself, while we seek mercy, we are committed to be merciful toward our brethren, and not to judge them:

"Judge not, and you shall not be judged. Condemn not, and you shall not be condemned" (37)

The fathers – those of the wilderness in particular – cared much for not judging; counting that nothing like it will provoke God to anger; on account of that it would take away His grace and mercy from whoever commits it; until he shows compassion on his

neighbor, when he, himself will gain the divine grace and mercy. …… According to Father 'Bomen' and Father 'Moses': [Whoever judges his neighbor will preoccupy himself with the sins of the others, and not with his own; and will be like him who forsakes his own dead, and mourns for the dead of the others]…….. and according to Father Dorotheos: [As long as we preoccupy ourselves with our neighbor's affairs, we shall lose our ability to reform ourselves]. [Nothing will provoke God to anger, bares man, or bring him to perdition, like slandering, judging, condemning, or despising his neighbor…….. It would be a serious matter to condemn someone for the sake of one sin he committed; hence the Lord Christ says to us:

"Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck that is in your brother's eye" (42)

Notice how He describes the sin of your brother as 'a speck', while he describes your hastening to condemn as 'a plank'. The most difficult of sins to deal with is most probably condemning our brother !..... Why would we rather not judge ourselves, and condemn our own evil, which we know well, and on which we will eventually give an account before God?! ……Why do we take by force the right of God to justify, judge and condemn?! ……..He who knows the condition of each of us, our possibilities, perversions, talents, and readiness?! ……He who alone has the right to judge according to His unique knowledge?! ……He who judges the works of the bishop in a way different from those of the ruler; the head of a monastery in a way different from that by which He does his disciple; on account of that the former has a longer experience and wider knowledge than the later who seeks to become a monk; the sick from the one with sound health; …… Who could recognize all those ordinances except the Creator of everything, the Maker of all, and the knowledgeable of everything?!].

Father Dorotheos supports his talk concerning the judgment, by telling the story of a ship carrying on board a load of slaves; when a saintly virgin approached the owner of the ship, and purchased from him a little slave girl, she carried to her own cabin to train her on the godly life, like her own little daughter. Shortly after that, a dancing troupe came to purchase the sister of that girl to train her on the works of fun, licentiousness and the life of corruption …… Here, Father Dorotheos stands amazed, thinking of how one of those two girls, snatched by force from their parents, had the good fortune of having company with a godly saint; while her sister, against her will, had to practice the corrupt life. And he wonders: Is it not up to God alone to judge the two girls in a way difficult for us to perceive; being aware of the secrets, longsuffering, and capable to justify or to condemn?!

Commenting on the words uttered by the Lord concerning judgment and condemnation, St. Cyril the Great said:

[While seeking from us to go deep in searching ourselves, to make sure that our behavior conforms to the divine commandments, and teachings, We find some who preoccupy themselves with interfering in the affairs and works of others; and once they discover something wrong with their behavior, they hasten to tear apart their persons by their sharp teeth and tongues, not perceiving that in reviling the others, they are actually reviling themselves, on account of that they, themselves, embody wrong doings, not less humiliating than those of the others. Hence the wise Paul says: "*Therefore you are inexcusable, O man, whoever you are who judge, for whatever you judge another you condemn yourself, for you who judge practice the same things"* (Romans 2: 1). We, therefore, are committed to have compassion on the weak, who fall captive to their vain and evil desires, and before whom the ways are closed shut, to be able to rid themselves from the snares of evil and sin. ……Let us pray for the sake of such miserable people who fall into despair; ……let us stretch to them a helping hand; ……..and let us be careful, lest we would probably fall the way they did; "*Do not speak evil of one another, brethren; he who speaks evil of a brother and judges his brother, speaks evil of the law, and judges the law"* (James 4: 11); because the law-Giver and the law-Judge are one and the same…….. As the one who may judge the evil soul has to be more exalted than it is; and as we cannot take on ourselves the task of a judge, because of our sins; We have to keep away from doing it; on account of the fact that, how we, being sinners, judge and condemn the others?!..... If your feel a tendency to judge the others, you should remember that the law did not appoint you a judge and executioner; and forcing yourself on such a task will bring you under judgment of the law which you break.

A believer should not preoccupy his mind with the shortcomings and offenses of the others, but with deeply searching his own; for according to how the blessed psalmist describes himself: "*If You Lord should mark iniquities; O Lord, who could stand?"* (Psalm 131: 3) and in another location, revealing his weakness, and asking for forgiveness, he says to God: "*For He remembers that we are dust"* (Psalm 103: 14)..

"Why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not perceive the plank in your own eye?" (41)

The Lord previously drew the attention to the danger of condemning the others by sharp tongues, saying "*Judge not, and you shall not be judged"*(Luke 6: 37) Now, the Lord presents to us many examples and evidences to exhort us to avoid such tendencies to judge and condemn the others according to our own measures; when we should rather search our own hearts, work on liberating them of such evil tendencies kindling inside us, and supplicate to the Lord to purge us from our iniquities and transgressions. He says to us: How would allow yourself to criticize the others, to reveal their shortcomings, and expose their evil doings, and maladies, when you are yourself a sinner, and sick?! …….. How can you clearly see to remove the speck from your brother's eye, with such a plank in your own eye that blinds your vision?! …… How dare you do that; when the others are less guilty than you?!

To be aware of how the condemnation of the others is hateful and evil, the gospel tells us that, while the Lord was going through the ripe fields doing good; His blessed disciple plucked some heads of grain, rubbed them in their hands, and ate to satisfy their hunger . But it so happened that they were being watched by a bunch of scribes and Pharisees, who hastened to approach the Lord to ask Him: "***Why are your disciples doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath?"*** **(1, 2)** They so uttered when they, themselves, were guilty of transgression against the sanctuary, and of doing contrary to God's commandments and ordinances, according to the statement said by the prophet Isaiah, saying: "*The faithful city has become a harlot. It was full of justice; righteousness lodged in it, but now murderers. Your silver has become dross; your wine mixed with water; your princes are rebellious, and companions of thieves. Everyone loves bribes, and follows after rewards. They do not defend the fatherless, nor does the cause of the widow come before them"* (Isaiah 1:21).

Despite having all those shameful attributes, those people have gone so far to dare to accuse the blessed disciples of not keeping the holy Sabbath; but the Lord Christ put them in their place by saying: "*Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithes of mint and anise and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy, and faith. These you ought you have done, without leaving the others undone….. Blind judges, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel"* (Matthew 23: 23, 24)……And no wonder that the Lord said about them: "*You are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness"* (Matthew 23: 27).That is how the hypocrite behaves, condemning the others and accusing them with the worst things, while he himself is blinded by a plank in his eyes.

We therefore, should care to search ourselves before we dare to sit on the judging bench to condemn the others; particularly if we occupy the position of a guide or a teacher, who is committed to be so pure, adorned by the grace of reverence; and not only knowledgeable in the exalted virtues, but walk according to them; to become a role model, and to have the right of judging the others, in case they go astray from the way of truth and uprightness. Whereas if the guide is slothful, he will not have the right to judge the others, when he, himself has the same weaknesses which he sees in them; according to the counsel of the blessed apostle James, saying: "*My children, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment"* (James 3: 1); and to the words of the Lord Christ, while crowning the heads of the righteous with the holy crowns, and threatening the sinners with chastisements, saying: "*Whoever, therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven"* (Matthew 5: 19)

And according to Father (Mar) Ephraim the Syrian: [Once the soul is filled with the fruition of the Spirit, it becomes free of depression and affliction;……. in her heart the door of love for the rest of people is opened; ……from her mind every tendency to say such is good and such is evil, this is righteous, and that is a sinner will be driven away;;……. Will put her inner feelings in order, with reconciliation between the heart and the conscience, lest one of them would move with anger or jealousy on any creature. ……On the other hand, the soul which is barren and empty of the fruition of the Holy Spirit, will perpetually be clothed with malice, grudge, affliction, depression, boredom, and disturbance, to keep on condemng people all the time].

+ Beware of condemning anyone, lest God will hate your prayer.

(St. Abba Anthony the Great)

+ He who condemns, break his wall down by his lack of knowledge.

(St. Abba Moses the black)

+ He who refers to the others what is good and what is evil, will not be worthy of the grace of God.

(Father (Mar) Ephraim the Syrian)

+ If you, O monk, condemn no one, God will grant you tranquility and repose in your cell.

(Abba Bemen)

+ Once one of the brothers sinned, and as he was driven out of the monastery; Father Bisarion stood up and went out with him, saying: [I too am a sinner].

(St. Baladius)

+ If you disregard your own sins, you will fall into those of your brother.

(Abba Isaiah)

+ (In the episode of the adulterous woman), Jesus condemned the sin and not the woman.

(St. Augustine)

The Lord Christ, our heavenly Friend, talked to us about love, practically translated through giving alms and covering up the weaknesses of the others; by which He presented to us the key to enter into the presence of God, to enjoy His love, and the key of His divine treasure, saying: "*forgive and you will be forgiven"* (37). According to St. Augustine: [These two works: covering up the

weaknesses of the others, and giving alms, are the two wings that lift your prayer up to the divine throne with no hindrance. Of his words: [The first righteousness is practiced in the heart, when you forgive your brother his sins; and the other righteousness is practiced outside it when you give bread to the poor. Present the two together, for without these two wings, your prayer will stay motionless]. …….[If you wish to have forgiveness, you, yourselves, should forgive the others: *"Forgive and you will be forgiven; Give, and it will be given to you"* (37, 38)F)

Finally, the Lord Christ confirms that, while presenting His commandments concerning love. He seeks the change of heart; He seeks from the believer to become a fruitful tree, saying:

"For a good tree does not bear bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit; for every tree is known by its own fruit; for men do not gather figs from thorns, nor do they gather grapes from a bramble bush. A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart brings forth evil. For out of the abundance of the heart, his mouth speaks" (43 – 45).

The followers of Valentinus depend on these verses and the like to proclaim their wrong view of the preexistence of basic difference in the nature of souls; as according to them, some souls, being good by nature, are incorruptible; while some others, being evil by nature are uncorrectable. The former are the good tree which produce good fruition, while the later are bad tree that produce bad fruition.

Setting forth to debate against that view, many fathers confirm the free will of man, and his possibilities in Jesus Christ to correct their life…….. If the tree is bad, it continues to produce bad fruition until it turns into a good tree in the Lord. That is what St. Augustine confirms in his sermons on the New Testament.

In the second century AD, the scholar Tertullian says: [It is not possible for the texts of the Holy Book not to conform to the truth; for the bad tree will never produce good fruition, unless it is grafted with good nature; nor the good tree to produce bad fruition unless it goes corrupt. …….. Even the stones could become children of Abraham, through having the faith of Abraham.; and the brood of vipers could produce fruition of repentance, if they denied their deceptive nature. That is the power of the grace of God, which is more active than nature itself].

If the human nature is committed to do good or evil against her free will; with no hope for change, the Lord Christ would not exhort us, saying: "*Make the tree good".*; and the talk itself would be without benefit; for the Lord exhorts us to receive His work in us, that keeping His commandments would not be just through the outer behavior, but through changing our old nature; saying: "*A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good"* (45)

d- **The need for building on the Rock:**

The Lord Christ again confirms that the goal of keeping His commandments should be to produce natural fruition of the new heart, founded on Him, likening our life to a building fit to be set upon the Lord Christ "The Rock of Ages", that the tempests of events would not be able to shake or destroy.

Our faith in Christ is the inner rock, through which we receive the Lord Christ Himself as the secret of our power; working in us by His Holy Spirit, to lift us to His Father's bosom.

Whoever is not founded on the "True Rock", his building will shake right and left by the continually changing torrents of the enemy, who would never stop until it utterly collapse.

==========

CHAPTER 7

THE FRIEND OF ALL

In the last chapter, the Evangelist showed the Person of the Lord Christ as a Friendly Teacher who intends to lift us up to His heavens to let us live by the heavenly law …… And lest some may think that He came to a specific category of people, the way many Gnostics did -- those who despised the simple and the commons, to set for themselves an aristocratic mental circle -- the Evangelist revealed how this heavenly Friend cared, by His love, to catch the foreigners (the servant of the centurion); the widows (raising the son of the widow of Nain); and the sinners (the woman who was a sinner) ……. how He intended to present His friendship to every man regardless of his race, possibilities, or his present behavior; to lift, by His Holy Spirit, all up to the true fellowship in His Holy Body.

1-	Healing the servant of the centurion	4 - 10
2-	Raising the son of the widow of Nain	11 - 17
3-	John the Baptist's delegation to the Lord Christ	18 - 23
4-	The Lord's testimony to John the Baptist	24 - 35
5-	The woman who was a sinner	36 - 50

1- HEALING THE SERVANT OF THE CENTURION:

In our study of the gospel according to Matthew (Chapter 8), we saw the centurion sends a delegation to the Lord to intercede for his sake, as a foreigner, to heal his servant; in which he represents the Gentiles who suffered affliction as captives to the devil; and in which the Gentiles showed a greater faith than the Jews; even though the Lord did not appear in flesh in their midst as He did with the Jews, among whom He dwelt as one of them through His incarnation from St. Mary. …… With faith filled with humility, that man of foreign race came to be worthy to hear from the Lord, a commendation not heard by the Jews, the owners of the law, the prophesies, and the promises, etc.

Anyway, if the Lord Christ proclaimed His friendship to the Jews through His incarnation from St. Mary of Jewish race; Here He proclaims His friendship to the Gentiles, through His commendation of the centurion of foreign race …… He opens His arms to the whole world, to embrace all with the same love.

Some may wonder why the Evangelist Matthew mentioned that the centurion came to meet the Lord on the way, to proclaim his unworthiness for having the Lord enter into his house to heal his sick servant, and his faith that, by a word from the Lord, his servant will be healed; while the Evangelist Luke, on the other hand says that)*;* believing in the authority of the Lord's word to heal his servant?

"***the centurion sent elders of the Jews to the Lord pleading with Him to come and heal his servant; then when the Lord went with them, and when He was already not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to Him, saying to Him, 'Lord, do not trouble Yourself, for I am not worthy that You should enter under my roof'***" (3 – 6)

According to St. John Chrysostom, the three encounters have taken place; St. Matthew mentioned only the third of them; while St. Luke mentioned the first and the second. He explained that the centurion, with his faith in the Lord Christ, intended to set forth to plead with Him to come to heal his servant; but the elders of the Jews, out of envy, lest the foreign centurion might proclaim his faith before the multitudes, went, themselves, to bring Him forth to the centurion's house, under the appearance of a work of mercy, saying:

"***For he loves our nation, and has built us a synagogue"*** (5);

but the Lord who knows the secrets of the hearts, waited for the centurion to send his friends, or to come to Him by himself, to glorify him because of his faith.

In that encounter between the Lord and the centurion, (or with his friends), it is to be noticed:

(1) Even if we assume good intention by the elders of the Jews, yet their plead for the centurion came to reveal their care for their 'ego', saying, "*For he loves our nation";* and concentrating on the seen things, saying, "*He has built us a synagogue";* While the Lord commended the centurion for what his heart bore of hidden faith full of humility.

(2) If, according to St. Ambrose, the centurion refers to the Gentiles who came to the Lord Christ with faith to heal the servant, namely to heal their souls, enslaved by the devil, for such long time, that they were about to perish eternally;

Receiving that centurion refers to receiving all categories into faith……. For the Roman leaders and soldiers were known for their great violence and brutality; that many Christians of the early centuries wondered if any of them could possibly remain in their position, once they receive the Christian faith…….. Responding to the request of that centurion, and commending him publicly before the multitudes, proclaiming that

"***He has not found such great faith, not even in Israel"*** (9),

reveals the possibility of living in a fellowship with the Lord, whatever is the work or the position of the believer. According to the scholar Tertullian: [The Roman soldiers who came to ask John the Baptist: "*What shall we do?"* (3: 114); and a centurion who beleved in the Lord Christ, indicate that there is no unlawfulness as long as man does not do unlawful work].

(3) Commenting on the care of the Lord to heal the servant of that centurion, and to set forth to his house, St. Ambrose said: [Meditate with me in the humility shown by the Lord of heaven, who did not hesitate to visit such a little servant of the centurion, to express the works of His divine mercy, and the feelings of His compassion. ……. Setting forth to the centurion's house was not for being unable to heal the servant from afar; but to give you an example of humility to follow His lead; and to teach you to honor the poor the way you do the great].

(4) Concentrating on the role played by the centurion toward his servant; through whose faith he cared to send a delegation, then went by himself to the Lord; St. Ambrose said: [We are put to shame by seeing how the servant was healed through the faith of the centurion, who pleaded for him, not only by faith, but through work as well].

(5) Comparing between the action of the Jewish elders who came interceding for the centurion, and the faith of the centurion himself, St. Cyril the Great says: [You see the Jewish elders plead to Jesus to visit the centurion in his house, believing that it is not possible to heal the servant by any other way; while you, on the other hand see the centurion himself, proclaiming publicly that Christ can heal the sick from afar; he sought from Christ only to say a word; to proclaim His exalted utterance; and to show His will. Hence the centurion proved worthy of Christ's commendation by his famous saying: "*I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel"* (9). For that man's behavior proved the soundness of his faith and the strength of his belief; for which the Lord rewarded him by healing his servant on the spot, saving him from sure death].

2- RAISING THE SON OF THE WIDOW OF NAIN:

If the Lord opened His heart wide for the foreigners, and the Roman centurion approached Him to heal his servant, to have a prominent position in the sight of the Lord, to be counted as a friend, closer to God than the children of Israel; Now we see Him show compassion on a widow who lost her only son to death; ……In His friendship, the Lord encountered the widows, the poor, as well as the foreigners ……a collective friendship with all mankind.

On another aspect, the centurion, according to many fathers like St. Cyril the great, St. Augustine, and St. Ambrose, refers to the Church, coming from among the Gentiles, who, despite the much temporal privileges they have got, yet they stood helpless before the illness of a servant; namely, not able to cure their inner souls, captivated by the enemy, like a miserable slave; and destroyed by sin, as an infirmity that push them to death. …… The widow, on the other hand refers to humanity in general, who after being widowed, here she loses her only son, whose dead body is carried in a coffin by men. She refers to humanity who became a widow through losing God, her true Man; while her dead son refers to every soul whose life was lost by sin, to become dead, carried by a body corrupted by evil, like the coffin-bearers; set forth on the way, on account of that she no more has a place in the house of the Lord, nor in paradise, the first home of man.

In raising that young man, it is noticed:

a-In the days of the Lord Christ, no doubt, many died, like the little children of Bethlehem, St. John the Baptist, and hundreds, even

thousands of martyrs, men and women, elders and little children. We do not know if the Lord raised many of them, or only the three mentioned by the Evangelists, namely: Lazarus, the son of the widow of Nain, and the young girl, daughter of Jairus; for the Lord Chris came, not to take the death of the body away from us, but to destroy the death of the soul, and to raise us above the authority of death, to make us, cross over through it together with Him, as conquerors and victorious, to reach the eternal encounter with him, face to face.

The Lord did not promise to drive death away from us, but, having died with, and for us, He turned death into a bridge to cross over to paradise, in anticipation of the great day of the Lord. That is why we hear that the mother of St. Gregory the Nezianzen put on her attire of feast to attend the funeral of her son 'Caesarius']

The Church cares first for the resurrection of the soul; on account of that the body will certainly resurrect; In case the soul enjoys resurrection, the body will enjoy the eternal glory together with her. According to St. Augustine: [It would certainly be more miraculous for someone to be raised from death to live eternally, than for someone to be raised temporarily to die again later on]; and he also says: [The widowed mother greatly rejoiced to see her son raised from the dead; when here, there are many are raised every day in spirit, in whom the Church, as their mother rejoices…….. The former was certainly dead in the flesh; while those were dead by the spirit. …… The death of the former brought forth seen weeping; while the unseen death of the later, was not the subject of enquiry, nor of perception. But they were sought by Him who knows for sure that they are dead, for He alone could grant them life. If the Lord did not come to raise them, the apostle would not say: "*Awaken you who sleep; arise from the dead; and Christ will give you light"* (Ephesians 5: 14). No one can wake up someone sleeping on his bed, as easily as the Lord Christ wakes up those in the tomb].

b- If the Church concentrates, first, on the resurrection of the soul, in an unseen way; she does not disregard the resurrection of the

body; something denied by some heretics through their despise of the body. The Lord raise those three from the dead to proclaim that He is the Grantor of resurrection to both the soul and the body.. According to St. Cyril the great: [Those whom the Lord raised from the dead are the greatest witnesses to the resurrection from the dead …….a fact referred to by the saintly prophet Isaiah who said: : "*Your dead shall live; … they shall arise; Awake and sing , you who dwell in the dust"* (Isaiah 26: 19). By "awake" he means the life of Christ strongly granted by the Holy Spirit; and referred to by the psalmist David who said: "*You hide Your face they are troubled; You take away their breath, they die and return to their dust"* (Psalm 104: 29). The disobedience of Adam was the cause of denying our face the vision of God, and attaching them to the dust of the earth; for God condemned the human nature by saying: *"For dust you are, and to dust you shall return"* (Genesis 3: 19). But at the end of time, the surface of the earth will be renewed, for God the Father, by His Son, grants life to everything in the Universe. While death brought old age and corruption on men; Christ, on the other hand is the life-Giver and the Renewer, on account of that He, Himself, is Life].

Raising those three from the dead, was therefore, a proclamation of His present work of raising our souls through our unity with Him, being "Life"; and raising our bodies in the great day of the Lord, on a level befitting of the eternal heavenly life.

c- In our study of the miracle of raising the daughter of Jairus (Matthew 9: 18-26), we saw how raising those three from the dead:

(Lazarus, and the young son of the widow, and the little girl daughter of Jairus,each carried a symbol of the work of the Lord Christ in the souls in the different stages of committing sins; or, according to St. Augustine: [Those three dead people refer to three kinds of sinners, whom the Lord Christ still raises from the dead up to this very day] …… The little girl symbolizes whomever sins in his heart; …….. the young man symbolizes him who commits sin, practically and openly; ……. And Lazarus symbolizes him in whom sin became a habit in his life…… Our Lord came to raise them all.

d- The Evangelist showed another aspect of the miracle of raising the son of the widow, saying:

"When He saw her He had compassion on her" (13).

The Lord raised that young man not to show off His authority over death, and His ability to grant life, but approached through His compassion. God deals with us on the level of authority, being the Creator and the Lord of all, and of that of love and mercy; being the Father, the Groom, the Friend, and the Lover of every man who accepts Him.

According to St. Ambrose: [we believe that the divine heart is moved by the tears of a widow tormented by the loss of her only son, whom the sympathy of the multitudes was not enough to make up for her great loss, and deprivation of motherhood …….; but by weeping, she earned the raising up of her young son].

I wish we are like that widow; losing our only son, namely our souls to the devil, to death through our disobedience, to be carried, lifeless, in the body as though in a coffin, out of the divine house; to encounter the Grantor of life, who, alone, would have compassion on us, to take away the burden of that death, and to restore to us our souls living in Him, and our bodies sanctified by His Holy Spirit.

e - "***Then He came and touched the open coffin; and those who carried him stood still"*** (14).

St. Ambrose comments on this saying: [Looking at the wooden coffin as being the tree through which we are carried to the tomb, the Lord touched it through ascending on the tree of the cross, to let us have the secret of life. ….. The tree that was a coffin to carry us down to the pit, by the power of our Lord Jesus Christ became "the power of God" (1 Corinthians 1: 18)

f- In that scene, St. Ambrose sees a living portrait of the Church, that would never cease to weep for our sake, beseeching her

Christ to bring back her only son to her through uttering the word of life; for it is written:

"***So he who was dead sat up and began to speak. And He presented him to his mother"*** (15).

According to St. Ambrose: [In case you happen to commit a deadly sin which you cannot have it cleansed by your tears, let your mother weep on you; namely the Church, who mourns over every son of hers, the way the widow did for her only son. She partakes of the suffering by the spirit; something natural when she sees her children brought to death by the deadly iniquities. …….There are indeed spiritual hearts like those of Paul who says: "*Yes brother, let me have joy from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord"* (Philemon 20).. We are the spiritual hearts of the Church, for we are members of her body, her flesh and her bones……. Let that loving widow weep, and let the multitudes partake of her sorrow; for then, you will be raised from the dead, will come out of the tomb; those who carry the death in you will stand still, and you will utter the words of life. Then all will fear and return blessing God who presented such medication that sets us free from the burden of death].

g- St. Cyril the Great, wondering about the secret why the Lord Christ touched the coffin, even though He could raise the dead by

just a word He utters, says: [That was, beloved brethren, to know that the body of Christ has its role concerning the salvation of man; for the body of the divine Word, the Great Christ, is the body of life, clothed with power and authority. …….. The way iron in case it touches fire, will have the appearance and functions of fire; so it is with the body of the divine Word, in which life is transfigured; and He will have the authority to wipe out death and corruption]

So the Lord demonstrated what His body has of ability to grant life, through the eternal unity of the Godhead with Manhood; by which he honored the body that was the object of the animosity and despise of man; blessing our nature in Him.

3- JOHN THE BAPTIST'S DELEGATION TO THE LORD CHRIST:

John the Baptist who has previously leaped in his mother's womb exulted by the visit of the Savior while still in the Virgin's womb;…….. who proclaimed His eternity (John 1: 30), and His mission as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1: 29);……who saw the Spirit come down on Him, and heard the Father testify to Him during His Baptism;……. Now sends a delegation to the lord Christ, to ask Him:

"***Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?"*** (20)

John had no doubt in the Person of the Lord Christ, but, by his delegation he intended to give the Lord the chance to catch his disciples to become His own. St. John had no wish to have disciples to work to his account, but intended to send his disciples to his Savior, to send them to the "Divine Friendship"……. Instead of entering into a debate with his disciples concerning the Savior, John preferred to send them to the Savior, to let the Savior Himself draw them to Him, to draw the rest of the disciples as well.

I may say: how successful is the shepherd who exhorts his flock – the people of God -- to encounter the Lord Christ Himself, to draw their hearts to Him, and enjoy the Divine Friendship, which would be his main goal; Such a shepherd would be working, not to the account of his own honor and publicity, but to that of the kingdom of God.

According to St. Cyril the Great: [Do not think that the blessed John the Baptist could not recognize the Word of God – the incarnate Christ --, for He was certainly sure of His identity. But by the spirit of wisdom, intended to make his question a useful lesson for his disciples. Having been isolated from Christ, those disciples did not have the chance to perceive His glory and authority; and were even overwhelmed by the fire of jealousy and envy, when they heard about His superiority over their master John in performing wonders and signs. Such intention was clear when they approached their master John, and said to him: *"Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified – behold, He is baptizing, and all are coming to Him'. To which John answered and said:' A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven. You, yourselves, bear me witness, that I said:, 'I am not the Christ, but, 'I have been sent before Him'. 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. Therefore, this joy of mine is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease"* (John 3: 28 – 30).

We would not say that John the Baptist became less honored with the increase of glory of the Lord Christ through the greater crowd of people who gathered around Him; but the decrease of John and the increase of the Lord Christ, means that John, being a human being has an unsurpassable limit of progress; whereas, the Lord Christ, being the incarnate God, has no limit to His growth, and no end of His greatness; hence John the Baptist says: "*He must increase, but I must decrease".* For he who stands still at certain level, is considered as decreasing, compared to Him who has no limit of His progress and growth. To prove that, John referred to the Godhead of the Lord Christ, and to that He is superior to all men, and said: *"He who comes from above is above all; He who is of*

the earth is earthly, and speaks of the earth" (John 3: 31) …….Who would that be except the incarnate Word of God, who is of the same essence as God the Father, and equal to Him; who because of His love for mankind, He came down from heaven, and humbly became like one of us. The Lord Christ, therefore, is Superior to all who are on earth, including John the Baptist, who had to be surpassed by the Lord Christ.

We do not deny that John was of high caliber qualities, incomparable in his attributes, and reached such level in righteousness and goodness to be worthy of the commendation of the Lord Christ who described him, saying: "*Assuredly I say to you, among those born by women, there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist"* (Matthew 11: 11); yet, despite all that, the Baptist was not from high above, but was earthly like any of us.

You can see that the disciples of John, having their hearts not purified of the terrible infirmities of the Jews, described to their master what they saw in Christ of divine power; but not in the best intention; But John, perceiving the exalted level of Christ, was pleased to hear them refer to His great glory. and to purify the hearts of his disciples, and to bring them closer to the Sun of Righteousness, the Lord of Glory Jesus Christ, he allowed for himself to appear ignorant and naive, and sent a delegation to ask the Lord Christ: "*Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?".*

Now, let us wonder: Why did the Evangelist Luke include this delegation, after mentioning the episode of healing the servant of the centurion, and of raising the son of the widow of Nain?

If the centurion represents the foreigners whom the heavenly Friend embraced by His love, and removed from them the death of sin; and if the widow represents the widows and the poor referred to as His friends to restore to them the gladness of their salvation; Now, through His encounter of the two disciples of John the Baptist, and drawing them into the net of His love, He proclaims His longing to acquire and to disciple the Jewish people……. John represents the law, and his two disciples or his delegates refer to the disciples of the law, or to those under the law. By sending them, John intends to proclaim that "*Christ is the end of the law"* (Romans 10: 4). Sending (two) disciples, the figure 2 refers to love; We shall not encounter our Christ through the law without love.

According to St. Ambrose: [John, representing the law, it was only natural that that law, who spoke about Christ, having become a prisoner in the darkness of the hearts of believers, and behind the bars of misunderstanding; could not go forth to the end as a witness of the divine purposes, unless being supported by the good tidings of the gospel …… Hence, John the Baptist sent his two disciples to increase their knowledge, that Christ is "the Perfection of the law"; those two disciples were symbols of two peoples: the Jews and the Gentiles].

The Lord Christ's reaction toward that delegation, concentrated on revealing the works of His exalted love; He let His works answer every inquiry by them. About that, St. John Chrysostom say: [Perceiving John's true goal of sending his disciples to him, the Lord did not answer their question by saying: "I am Him", but left it to them to know it through His works, which are more convincing than any words]. According to St Ambrose: [Man believes through the testimony of works more so than by words].

As a representative of the law and the prophesies, John the Baptist sent his two disciples; Whereas the Lord Christ, brought them forth into His divine work itself, to let them say with the Evangelist St. John: "*Which we have heard; which we have seen with our eyes; which we have looked upon; which we have handled, concerning the word of life"* . Presenting to them the works long prophesied by the prophets; He said to them:

"Go and tell John the things you have seen and heard; that the blind see, the lame walk, the leapers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the gospel preached to them; and blessed is he who is not offended because of Me" (Luke 7: 22, 23).

According to St. Ambrose: [This is the perfect testimony by which the Lord could be recognized, for the sake of prophecy concerning Him and not any other: "*The Lord gives food to the hungry; the Lord gives freedom to the prisoners; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind; the Lord raises those who are bowed down"* (Psalm 146: 7, 8),

The signs of the divine authority, not the words of preaching, would scatter the darkness of night from the eyes of the blind, to be healed to see; make the deaf hear; cure the withered hands and the frail knees; and draw the dead to the light, that from them the power of life would emerge].

The Lord warned the two disciples of John the Baptist, by saying: "*Blessed is he who is not offended because of Me"* (23); For the cross was close at hand, in which many were offended, according to the words of the apostle Paul: "*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 Corinthians 1: 18).. If the Lord came to open the eyes to see His secrets; and the ears to hear His divine voice; and to liberate the souls from the captivity of sin, to purify them from the inner defilement, and to raise them from the dead, the price of all that is "the Cross", which is "*to the Jews a stumbling block, and to the Greeks foolishness"* (1 Corinthians 1: 23).

4- THE LORD'S TESTIMONY TO JOHN THE BAPTIST:

Rejoicing in that he decreases while the Lord Christ increases (John 3: 30), John the Baptist sent his delegation with the intention of giving the chance to his own disciples to become disciples of the Savior Himself; an action that did not lower the statute of John, but, on the contrary, made the Lord Himself speak to the multitudes concerning John, saying:

"What did you go out to the wilderness to see? A man clothed in soft garments? Indeed those who are generously appareled and live in luxury are in king's courts. But what did you go out to the wilderness to see? A prophet? I say to you, and more than a prophet ……." (25, 26)

In our study of the gospel according to Matthew (11:7-14), we presented many commentaries by the fathers about that great divine commendation. Here I shall just give some other commentaries to complete the ones previously mentioned:

a- We notice how the Lord Christ did not commend John the Baptist in the presence of his disciples, but after their departure (24), so as not to appear flattering ……..I wish we, as well, would not care to commend the others in their presence, but rather in their absence, to appear truly loving them without hypocrisy, nor hoping for a temporal reward.

b- Presenting an interpretation of the Lord's commendation for St. John the Baptist, which He ends by proclaiming that

"But he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he" (28)

St. Cyril the Great says that the Lord chose to testify to this saint as the greatest of those who got the righteousness of the law; the greatest among those born by Jewish women; a prophet who surpassed any other prophet; and testified by the prophet Malachi (3: 1) to be "the angel of the Lord"……. Yet, even that greatness in the law would be counted as nothing if compared to the good tidings of the gospel; For through the law, however man strives, he will still remain "born by a woman"; whereas the gift of the new covenant, lifts us above the flesh and blood, to gain sonhood to God.

Here are some quotes of the words said by St. Cyril the Great in this concern:

[Even though by His words the Savior of the whole world, intended to show what are in the law of favor and privilege; yet, in the circle of the spiritual edification, it has no great role; whereas the grace of faith in Christ, is the guarantee of blessings and goodness, for in it there is the power to crown the heads with crowns of limitless beauty.

That is what we learn from the sayings of the blessed Paul, who even though proclaims that he was liberated as far as the righteousness in the law is concerned, to be blameless; yet he cries out, saying: *"But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yes indeed, I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord"* (Philippians 4: 7, 8); and he counted the Israelites worthy of blame and rebuke by saying: "*For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes"* (Romans 10: 3). .and in another location he says: *"We, who are Jews by nature, and not sinners of the Gentiles, knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified" (Galatians 2: 15, 16).*

Therefore, whoever believes in Christ would have glories that surpass those of the righteousness given by the law. Hence the Baptist, concerning the righteousness of the law, was counted as incomparable; yet, on another aspect **"***He who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he"* (28). By "the kingdom of God", as we already said, is meant (the grace of faith in Christ), by which we become worthy of every spiritual blessing that comes from God our Father, high above. for it would liberate us from every rebuke, grant us the right of sonhood to God, make us partners in the gift of the Holy Spirit; and heirs to the heavenly treasure.

How could the Lord Christ describe John the Baptist of that "*Among those born by women, there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist, but he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he"* (28)? This may be answered as such: [John, like other prophets who preceded him, was born by a woman; while those who received faith in Christ, have become, not the sons of women, but the sons of God, according to the words of the wise Evangelist John, saying: "*But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name; who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God"* (John 1: 12, 13).
We have become the children of the God: "*having been born again, not of corruptible seed, but incorruptible, through the word of God, which lives and abides forever"* (1 Peter 1: 23). Therefore, all who are born, not of the seed of man, but of the Word of God, surpass those born by women.

Another reason why those born of the Word of God surpass those born by women, is that the later have earthly fathers; whereas the former have a heavenly Father. For Christ being their Brother, they, by such grace, became the children of God; on account of that Christ publicly proclaimed: "*Do not call anyone on earth your father, For One is your Father, He who is in heaven" (Matthew 23: 9)*; which is confirmed by the wise Paul saying: "*Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out 'Abba, Father!"* (Galatians 1; 6). For once the Lord Christ came, and destroyed the Hades, He granted the grace of sonhood to all who believed in Him, and on the head of the list are his saintly disciples, on whom "*He breathed, and to them He said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit; if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained"* (John 20: 22). And on account of that those disciples have so become partners in the divine nature, having been given the gift of the Spirit, great in authority, they had to be given the divine power to forgive the sins of some, and to retain those of others].

c- Concentrating on the words by the Lord Christ in His commendation of John the Baptist, we find it start as such:

"What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind; but what did you go out into the wilderness to see? A man clothed in soft garments?..........(24, 25)

The Lord sees the world as though has become a barren wilderness with no fruitful trees; for sin has corrupted creation and turned it from being a joyful and satisfactory paradise into a barren and a horrible wilderness, full of reeds shaken by the wind, right and left……. St. John the Baptist, even though was raised in the wilderness of the world as a reed, but, through his faith in the Savior Messiah, was not a reed shaken by the winds of heresies, nor broken by the storms of the earthly evil desires. But he was truly that reed held in the hand of the Lord Christ as a writing pen, to call all to enjoy His salvation.

According to St. Ambrose: [Likening the present life to a barren fruitless and unproductive wilderness, the Lord warns us against being like those who are puffed up, and have their minds in the earthlies; …… those who, even though without any hidden virtue, they boast in the vain glory of this mortal world; …….those who, when exposed to the winds of this life, they become disturbed like a weed shaken by the wind, owing to that they are fruitless of the true righteousness, even though they may have the worldly adornment.

But if you take that reed out of the earth, trimmed it, namely took away the old man and his works (Colossians 3: 9), and delivered it into the hand of a clever writer, it will turn into a pen by which the commandments of the Lord are revived *"not on the tablets of stone, but on tablets of flesh, that is of the heart"* (2 Corinthians 2: 3)

If it so happens that we are planted in the wilderness as a reed shaken by the winds, let us deliver our life into the hands of Him, about whom it is written: "*A bruised reed He will not break"* (Isaiah 42: 3), to uproot us from the ground of this life, and plant us in Him as members of His body; and to turn our life into a pen in His hand, He dips in His precious blood, to sanctify our spirits, souls, and bodies, to become truly, "*an epistle of Christ ministered by us, written not with ink, but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of flesh, that is of the heart"* (2 Corinthians 3: 3).

Again He repeats: **"*What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A man clothed in soft garments?"***
According to St. Ambrose: [Here, even though many men imitate women in putting on soft garments …… but the Lord most probably refers here to the human bodies by which the spirit is clothed; that is why Joseph's tunic was dipped in blood (Genesis 37: 23), like the body of Christ.

The soft garment is the works and habits of the evil desire; hence the apostle exhorts us to take off the old man and to put on the new (Colossians 3: 9).

John the Baptist did not put on soft garments; namely, he did not deliver his body to evil desires, pleasures, and sinful habits, like those who were held captives in the palace of the devil, but his body was sanctified together with his soul to the account of the kingdom of God.

Then the Lord goes on to say:

"**What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you, and more than a prophet. This is he, of whom it is written: "*Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, who will prepare Your way before you"* (7:** 27).

And, on the tongue of the Lord, St. Cyril says: [Yes, he is a saint and a prophet, great among the prophets; for he, not only proclaimed the future coming of Christ, but cried out saying: "*Behold, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world"* (John 1: 29).

According to St. Ambrose: [Yes, and greater than a prophet; for, by him, the era of the prophets came to an end; and he was more than a prophet, for He whom many desired to see, John prophesied, saw, and even baptized.

But, even though John is greater than those with whom he was an equal "as being born by women"; yet the nature of the Lord Christ is different, and is incomparable to any human birth; …….Man could never be compared to God].

While commending His angel John the Baptist, the Lord Christ confirmed the power of preaching the gospel; for, even though He called John "*the greatest among those born by women*", but "*he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he"* (28); on account of that John represents the covenant of the law; while the message of the gospel presented "the sonhood to God", through which the believer enjoys what is greater than what men of the old covenant did.

Anyway, John the Baptist, representing the law, came, hard and firm, to lead humanity to the Lamb of God; while the Messiah, the Lamb Himself, came a gentle Friend to mankind. And on account of that the Jews rejected this and that, the Lord rebuked by saying:

"To whom then shall I liken men of this generation and what are they like? They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another saying: 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we mourned for you, and you did not weep. For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say he has a demon. The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look a glutton and winebibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners. But wisdom is justified by all her children" (31 – 35)

In the following, we quote the commentaries of some fathers on that divine saying:

+ Here, the Lord does not talk about the kind of dance associated with evil desires, but the spiritual dance, in which man exalts with his body, and does not allow his members to enjoy the earthly desires.

  Paul spiritually danced, when, for our sake he "*pressed toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus"* (Philippians 3: 14).

  That is then the secret: We played the song of the new covenant, and you did not dance; namely you still did not exalt your spirits through the divine grace.

  "***We mourned to you, and you did not weep"*** (32); namely you did not show remorse, when John the Baptist came to call you to repentance by the grace of the Lord Christ. The Lord is the Giver of grace, even though it was proclaimed by John as His servant; as to the church she cherishes both, so as to reach the grace without taking away the repentance……. Grace is the gift of the Lord, who, alone grants it; and the repentance is the medicine for the sinner.

  (St. Ambrose)

+ The Jews believed neither in the songs of praise of the prophets, nor for their lamentations.

+ "We played the flute (music) for you, and you did not dance

  Moses sang when the water split, and he and the children of Israel crossed the Red Sea (Exodus 15); ….. Isaiah sang for his well-beloved vineyard (Isaiah 5: 1), to prophesy that the Jewish people who had previously produced many virtues, will be produce a bunch of iniquities. …….. The three young men sang when their feet were dampened, as fire turned for them into dew (Daniel 3)……..Habakkuk sang a snng in which he prophesied the passion of Christ, as a source of comfort to the believers (Habakkuk 3), in an attempt to appease the sorrow of the people.

  The prophets, therefore sang spiritual songs that arose to the level of preaching the general salvation' And they also wept to soften by their sorrowful lamentations the stone-hard hearts of the Jews.

  The Holy Book teaches us to sing to the Lord (Psalm 46: 80; and to dance with wisdom, according to the words said to the prophet Ezekiel to "*pound his fists, and stamp his feet"* (Ezekiel 6: 11). God does not seek doing funny movements by an excited body, nor the clapping of women; ……..but seeks the respectable dance, in

which the spirit dances through the rising of the bodyby the good works; when we hang our harps on the willow trees.

The Lord commands His prophet to pound his fists, stamp his feet, and to sing, as he sees the wedding, in which the Church will be the bride, and Christ will be the beloved Groom; It is a magnificent wedding, in which the spirit unites with the Word, and the body with the spirit.

That is the wedding which David tried to realize, and to which we are invited; ……he exhorts us to hasten toward that joyful scene, saying: '*raise a song and strike the timbrel, the pleasant harp with lute"* (Psalm 81:: 2, 3) ….Can you not imagine the prophet David dancing?! ……. Can you not hear the sound of the harp, and the stamping of the feet of the dancers?!..... You, as well should take for yourself a harp; so that, when you enjoy the touch of the spirit, your inner strings would respond to the echo of the good works. ……Hold the harp, to have harmony between your words and your works; …….. take the tmbrel so that the spirit would grant you to sing internally through the tool of your body.

(St. Ambrose)

\+ It so seem that the Jewish children in the marketplace invented a game of this sort; separating themselves into two groups to play roles contradictory to one another: One group play music, while the other group mourn as though with cries of sorrow and misery. Yet the later group did not partake of the joy and pleasure of the former group; who, as well disregarded to comfort the later group; which is apparent from their admonishment to them, saying: "*We mourned to you and you did not weep".*

The Lord Christ publicly proclaims that the Jewish people and their rulers were playing that game their children did; saying: "*ise the Lord with the harp; make melody to Him with an instrument of ten strings; Sing to Him a new song; Play skillfully with a shout of joy"* (Psalm 33: 2, 3). Can you imagine David the king dancing?

I wonder how, O ignorant Pharisees, how could you come to believe in Christ?! What way would draw you to the Lord?! When you look at everything through dark lenses; and nothing for you is worthy of commendation?!....."*Repent*", like John the Baptist told you "*For the kingdom of heaven is at hand"* (Matthew 3: 2). …….. How true was the testimony about you, by him, who you testified to be an example of goodness and exaltation!..... Was he not who dwelt in the wilderness, slept on the dust, and covered himself by the sky?!..... Was he not who fed on locusts and wild honey, and was clothed by rough and cheap attire?!..... How then could you claim that he has a demon, he who, by his asceticism killed the law of sin , lying deep in your heart of flesh, the hero who bravely fought against the evil tendencies of your minds;…… Is there anything greater than the life of asceticism, by which the evil pleasures of iniquity are quenched?!..... The Baptist was so extremely faithful for the Lord Christ; had no tendency of the evil desires of the body; had so deserted the pleasures of this world, in order to reach his ultimate goal, namely to prepare the way for the Redeemer.

Tell me, O people: Is it possible for such a man to have a demon; he who never bowed his back to evil and iniquity?!

We do not deny that the Baptist could never reach such an exalted level except through Christ who brought down the honor of the devil, and broke his teeth, to exalt the saints.

Are you not ashamed, O people, to say such a thing about the messenger who was known for perseverance and courage, to be crowned with the crowns of victory?!..... Are you not ashamed to revile him with every thing so hateful?! …….to deny for him to have the grace of reason and clear mind, and to accuse him falsely of being out of his mind?!

Now let us look at another Person whom the Jews saw absolutely contradictory to that of John the Baptist…… The Lord Christ did not dwell in the wilderness, but dwelt in the cities in the company of His saintly disciples; was not fed on locusts and wild honey, was not clothed in camel's wool, and did not girdle his loins with a leather belt.

Christ, as you can see lived the city life, and did not endure the tough life practiced by John the Baptist. Would you blame Him for such behavior; or will commend His tendency to have the company of people, and that he never cared for a specific kind of food? No, absolutely not, but you, as well, reviled Him by your sharp tongue, saying: *Look, a glutton and a winebibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners"* (34). How could you prove your claim, when you notice that as He was invited by Mary and Martha in Bethany, and saw one of them exaggerate

in serving Him, He rebuked her, saying: "*Martha, Martha,, you are worried and troubled about many things; but one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen the good part, which will not be taken away from her"* (Luke 10: 41, 42). That was how Christ did wherever he went!

Would you accuse the Lord Christ of greed, on account of keeping company with tax collectors and sinners?..... Can you tell me what harm came upon Him by such behavior? Was He not above the level of humanity with all its evil and iniquities?! …… The Lord said, and His words are true: *"The ruler of this world is coming, and he has nothing in Me"* (John 14: 30). Nothing of the iniquities of the sinners, could accordingly cling to the Lord Christ.

Some may protest and say: [The law of Moses commanded us to *You shall make no covenant with them nor with their gods"* (Exodus 23: 32). Let us then study the goal of the law of the Jews for giving such a command. Its goal could not boast with pride, and to act haughtily on the sinners; but, on account of your weak minds, you would probably fall in evil and sin. Therefore, for fear that may probably be drawn to the corrupt and evil desires, the law gave the command to keep away from mixing with the evil people; for "*Evil company corrupts good habits"* (1 Corinthians 15: 33). The law, therefore gave such a command to keep you from falling because of your weakness and helplessness……. If you, on the hand, are clothed with high virtues, and holding fast in the fear of God, the law would never stand in your way to mix with the weak sinners; as you, being close to them would most probably be good for them, and be a motivation for them to follow your lead, to tread with wide steps toward the sought perfection and the required truth. ……. Therefore, do not depend upon the law of Moses, to act haughtily against the weak and the miserable; and do not blame Christ for keeping company with the tax collectors and the sinners.

(St. Cyril the Great)

5- THE WOMAN WHO WAS A SINNER:

We already said that the Lord Christ, being a heavenly Friend, opened His heart to the foreigners (caring for the centurion), the widows (raising the son of the widow of Nain); and drew the disciples of John the Baptist, as representatives of the old covenant, to get in touch with the works of His exalted love. Now we see how a woman sinner – who, according to the Jews was worthy of being stoned to death – forced her way to that friendship, to encounter our Lord Jesus Christ as her heavenly Groom, in the house of Simon the Pharisee, without an apparent invitation.

The encounter of that woman sinner drew many souls to repentance; for it proclaimed the true friendship of God to the sinners, His love for every soul, and His longing for the salvation of all. Many fathers wrote their comments on that encounter, among whom was St. (Mar) Ephraim the Syrian, who described it in a magnificent literate style, which I previously translated and published under the title "Love and Tears" in the series "The Christian Story".

Through the spirit of the fathers, we can present the following comments on the story of the woman sinner:

a- According to St. Augustine: [The woman sinner set forth to the banquet without invitation; for she knew that the divine Physician is there; and with a holy daring she sought health from Him …….. perceiving how tough her infirmity was, and that the Physician she sough is capable of healing her, she forced her way very aggressively …… Yet, she approached, not the Savior's head, but His feet; …….. Having walked such a long time in evil, seeks in His feet the way to righteousness].

That wo9man, representing the soul, broken down by iniquities, found in the feet of her Savior, the secret of the possibility of walking along the way of righteousness, and of setting forth by and in Him to the bosom of God the bFather, to enjoy the eternal heavenly friendship.

b- When the Pharisee invited the Lord Christ to eat in his house, the Lord, even though entered into his house, yet He did not enter into his heart. It most probably cost the man much, and was envied by the others for having the Lord enter into his house; but that woman sinner forced her way into the banquet with the daring of love, and encountered with the Lord as the Groom of her soul……. While the Pharisee represents the soul that hides behind the outer appearances and not the depths; received the Lord in her house, and not in her heart; the woman sinner represented the soul, serious in her attempt to be saved; hence cared for the hidden encounter with the heavenly Groom.

Comparing between the Pharisee and the woman sinner, St. Ambrose says:

- [While the Pharisee gave no water for the Lord's feet, the woman washed His feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head. The former represents the unbelieving Jews who have no water to wash the feet of the Lord, who intended to walk in their conscience (Who could wash his conscience who do not receive the water of Christ?). The Church, on the other hand has this water (The Baptism), and has these tears (the repentance)].

  And in another location St. Ambrose says: [The woman cleansed her sins by washing the Lord's feet with her tears…… O Lord Jesus! Allow me to wash Your feet from what came upon them through walking in me (even though they were not defile..... Having no water of life to wash Your feet, I shall present my tears ……Washing Your feet; I trust that I am washing myself, and hear You say to me: "*Your many sins are forgiven for you loved much" (see 47)*

  And in a third location, he says: [Confessing your sins by your tears, you will hear the divine Justice say: 'You washed My feet by your tears, and wiped them with the hair of your head'……. The tears of our love, not only could wash our sins, but could, as well, wash the feet of the divine Word, to have the fruition of His steps in us, They are tears that not only could set the sinners up, but are food for the righteous who says: "*My tears have been my food day and night"* (psalm 42: 2); …….In case you cannot approach the Lord's head, touch His feet by your head]
- While the Pharisee had no hair to wipe the Lord's feet, for not being a Nazirite to the Lord, the Church, on the other hand, has hair, and seeks the Lord. ……. According to St. Ambrose: [The hair by which the woman wiped out the Savior's feet, refers to the riches of no value unless part of it is given to the poor – the Savior's feet – to wash their wounds and sufferings].

  And in another location he says: [Loosen your hair, and present to Him all the talents of your body].For all our physical energies, talents, possibilities, and emotions, will remain like useless hair, unless they are sanctified through putting them to use, to wash the Savior's feet; namely to serve His brethren!

- Concerning the kisses of that woman sinner, not practiced by the Pharisee, St. Ambrose says: [The kiss, being the sign of love, the unbelieving Jew, could not practice a kiss, because he does not know nor receive the peace of Christ, who said: "*Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you"* (John 14: 27) The Jewish synagogue, therefore, has no kisses, like those of the Church that anticipated Christ and loved Him, saying: *'Let him kiss me with kisses of His mouth"* (Songs 1: 1) intending to quench the fire of her longing in anticipation of the Lord's coming by His kisses, and to dampen her thirst by that gift]. Then the saint goes on to say: [The Church alone has the bkisses of the bride, for the kiss is a down payment of matrimony, and a special privilege of the wedding].

  The kisses of the bride are true are faithful, being the kisses of the bride kindled with love for her Groom, which was not experienced by Judas when he gave his false kiss to deliver his Lord; to whom St. Ambrose says: [You presented a kiss, you who know nothing about the secret of the kiss; for what is sought is the kiss of the heart and soul, rather than that of the lips …….Where there are no love, faith, nor emotion, what sweetness could be in the kisses?!].

c- Comparing between the woman who previously poured the fragrant oil over the Savior's head while He was reclining in the house of Simon the leper in the village of Bethany (Matthew 26), and the woman mentioned here; St. Ambrose believes that, even though they are separate events, yet they both presented fragrant oil. The former represents the soul that enters into the divine friendship, exalts in the perfect life in the Lord, and pours the fragrant oil on the Savior's head, having reached much of His divine secrets; ……. While we, on the other hand, representing the later woman, and feeling our sins, come to Him from the back, longing to reach His feet; and according to the saint: {Even though she was a sinful woman, yet she had her own fragrant oil.

  We may say that, being sinners, walking along the way of our repentance, I wish we force ourselves into the house of the Pharisee to encounter our Lord wherever He is, to pour fragrant oil on His feet…….. the fragrant oil of the true repentance, full of hope through the holy blood flowing from the stabbed side.

  Again, in his interpretation of the gospel according to Luke, At. Ambrose, believing that this fragrant oil only concerns the Church, he says: [Blessed is he who can wash the Savior's feet with fragrant oil, something Simon the Pharisee did not do……. The fragrant oil being the extract of the fragrance of many flowers, it gives an assortment of diverse sweet fragrances; no one can pour such a fragrant oil, except the Church that possesses so many flowers of diverse sweet fragrance. ……..Here the image of the sinful merge with Christ who bore the image of a slave (bore the body of sin)]

d- While the Pharisee did not benefit of his encounter of the Savior, because of his persistence on pride, the sinful woman had much benefit, for she loved much through her spirit of humility …….. By pride, man loses every spiritual blessing; and by love, full of humility, he enjoys the love of the Savior Himself, and the forgiveness of his sins.

+ The Lord of humility, even though He sat in the house of a proud Pharisee called Simon, yet not in his heart, where there was *"no where to lay His head"* (Luke n9: 57).

(St. Augustine)

+ Have much love to have much forgiveness.

Even though Paul persecuted the Church, yet he loved much with persistence even to martyrdom; hence his many sins were forgiven;…….for he shed his blood for the sake of the name of God.

(St. Ambrose)

+ While the sinful woman did not lose the straight forward way, the ignorant Pharisee lost it, saying within himself: "***This man, if he were a prophet would know who, and what manner of woman this is who touches Him, for she is a sinner"*** **(**39). Being proud of himself and of his sect, weak in his mental capacity, he could not perceive the issue as he should have. He should have adorned his life with exalted features, not to condemn the others with what they do not have; But, clinging to the hems of the hard law, he sought from the Lord Jesus Christ to obey the law of Moses, that commanded the holy men to keep away from the unclean wicked, and in which God put the blame on everyone chosen to be a ruler of the Jewish synagogue, who did not, according to one of the prophets, did not discern between the clean and the unclean But the Lord Christ resurrected, not to bring us under the curse of the law, but to redeem the sinners by His mercy that surpassed the law; for "*The law was added because of transgressions"* (Galatians 3: 19); "*that every may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore, by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin"* (romans 3w: 19, 20)

Christ came to fulfill the debt of every debtor, however big or few, and to have compassion on all men, great and small; so that no man would ever be denied of partaking the goodness of Christ…….. To give us a clear example of His mercy, the Lord forgave that sinful woman her evils, by saying to her: "*Your sins are forgiven you"* ; something that would never be uttered, except by the mouth of God, on account of including authority that surpasses every authority; for, as the law judges the sinner, who could then soar above the level of the law, except Him who put it in the first place, and commanded it?!..... Instantly, the Lord liberated the woman, and drew the attention of the Pharisee and all those around him in his banquet, to exalted issues; namely, to that the Word Christ is God; not one of the prophets, but surpasses every man; even though He incarnated and became Man.

You should, therefore, not despair when you feel the burden of your past sins, for the mercies of Christ are extensive…… Even though your sins are great, yet Christ's mercy is greater; By His grace the sinner is justified, and the captive is set free. But beware that it is the faith in Christ that makes us worthy of those redeeming blessings; for faith is the way to life and grace; and in it we set forth to the heavenly secret places, where we inherit the kingdom of the righteous saints, and come to be members in the kingdom of Christ.

(St. Cyril the Great)

Finally, we would end our tal about the sinful woman by saying that she revealed the depth of God's exalted love for men;

as according to St. Erinaos: [As the physician is justified by his patients, God is proclaimed through men].

==========

CHAPTER 8

THE FRIEND WHO UNCEASINGLY WORKS

In the last chapter we saw the Lord Christ open His heart to all, to embrace in His friendship the foreigners and the sinners …… Now we see Him accompanied by several women "*who provided for Him from their substance"* (1 - 3). He, not only received the sinful woman, and commended her before the Pharisee, but cared to sanctify the talents of women and their possibilities as living members in His Holy Body. In His friendship we see Him not discerning between man and woman, but we see Him even not giving much weight to the physical relationship according to the flesh (19 - 21). Seeking the friendship with all, He unceasingly work for the sake of the disturbed (22 – 25), the rejected, and even the demon-possessed (26 – 29), purifies the defiled (43 – 48), and raises the dead .

1-	The Lord cares for the service of women	1 - 3
2-	The Lord works as the sower (the parable of the sower)	4 - 15
3-	The Lord grants the light	16 - 18
4-	The Lord seeks all to be related to Him	19 - 21
5-	The Lord calms down the rage of the waves	22 - 25
6-	The Lord heals the demon-possessed man	26 - 39
7-	The Lord heals the woman with the flow of blood	43 - 48
8-	The Lord raises the daughter of Jairus	49 – 56

1- THE LORD CARES FOR THE SERVICE OF WOMEN:

"Now it came to pass afterward, that He went through every city and village, preaching and bringing the glad tidings of the kingdom of the kingdom of God, and the twelve were with Him, and certain women…." (1, 2)

After the banquet of Simon the Pharisee, that referred to the appearance of the Lord Christ in the midst of the Jews -- His own (the house of Simon); whom He denied Himself, because of the pride of their hearts, for His friendship to be taken by force by the Gentiles (the woman sinner), through her love springing from a humble heart; The Lord Christ departed from Capernaum to preach in every city and village, and with Him were the twelve disciples and certain women; It is as though He set forth to the world through His Church to proclaim His kingdom.

We should pause a little to notice that John the Baptist had previously preached that the kingdom of God is close at hand; But here, the Lord Christ came to present the kingdom as already dwelling in our midst, saying: ""*Indeed, the kingdom of God is within you"* (Luke 17: 21).

He set forth to work, and with Him were the twelve and certain women, on which the Evangelist Luke concentrated saying;

"*And certain women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities – Mary, called 'Magdalene', out of whom had come seven demons, and Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others who provided for Him from their substance"* (2, 3)

In the introduction we said the Evangelist Luke, writing the gospel according to him, to the Greeks, concentrated on the Lord's care for the service of women. In the text before us we notice the following:

(1) The company of those women was set upon their experience of the salvation work; for some of them were healed of evil spirits and infirmities; and some others tasted the sweetness of the word of God. That company lasted long, for those women followed the Lord even until the moments of the cross; and certain of them preceded the disciples in the moments of the burial, to become preachers of the resurrection. Then they kept company with the disciples in their worship, and together with them enjoyed the feast of 'Pentecost', as it came in the book of Acts.

Anyway, if the old covenant did not utterly disregard the role of women, the new covenant, on the other hand, raised her status, according to the prophecy saying: "*And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh; Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy* (Joel 3:28). The Church looks at women and girls as members in the body of Christ, fellow partners together with men; their hearts are altars for the Lord, and a temple for the Holy Spirit.

(2) Their service for the Lord was not temporary, for the expression "*were serving Him"* implies the continuation of work

(3) Having become poor for our sake to make us rich, the Creator Lord did not object to be sustained by women. It is indeed a sign of an exalted love for the Satisfier of the souls and bodies to accept to be served by the weak human hands.

2- THE LORD WORKS AS A SOWER (The parable of the Sower):

As a true Friend, the Lord Christ likens Himself to a sower who never cease to sow the seeds of His love on every soil, in the hope that they would receive them to grow and produce fruition without any obstacle, as unceasing fruition of love. We have already talked about this parable, together with some comments by many fathers, in our interpretation of the gospel according to Matthew (13: 10), and the gospel according to Mark (4: 2). I shall here only include the following points:

a- According to Father 'Theophlactius', Bishop of Bulgaria (765 – 840 AD): [The Lord Christ used parables to draw the attention of His listeners; for people were used to be drawn to vague issues; and at the same time, to keep them vague for the unworthy, namely those who do not care of the salvation of their souls

b- Our heavenly Friend came, not to condemn humanity, but to sow her hearts with exalted seed. He came to sow the seeds by Himself, when He, Himself is the seeds sown in the heart. Generously granting us Himself, He does not present outside seeds as men of the old covenant used to do; But being a lover of all, He presented Himself, even if we are a way paved with stones and thorns…….. According to Father 'Theophlactius', the Son of God does not cease to sow the seeds of the Word of God in our souls, not only as a Teacher, but as a Creator, by throwing the good seeds in us].

St. Gregory the Nezianzen confirms that the different kinds of soils, as it came in this parable, do not mean the existence of different and unchangeable human types, as claimed by some heretics, counting man as being driven forth (against his will) by nature; But the expression said by the Lord "*To you it has been given"* (10) came to proclaim that this parable was given to those who have free will, and could enjoy change in the Lord.

3- THE LORD GRANTS THE LIGHT:

The Lord throws Himself as seeds that work inside our hearts, for the fruition of the Holy Spirit to be shown in us, to be light for the others; saying:

" No one , when he has lit a lamp, covers it with a vessel, or puts it under a bed, but sets it on a lampstand, that those who enter may see the light. For nothing is secret that will not be revealed, nor anything hidden that will not be known and come to light" (16, 17).

As we have already commented on these divine phrases in our interpretation of the gospel according to Mathew (5: 15) and the gospel according to Mark (4: 21), Here, we shall only include the following points:

a- What is the lighted lamp, but the heart kindled by the fire of the Holy Spirit, we have got in the sacraments of Baptism and 'Meron'; the fiery Spirit who makes us ministers of God, kindled with fire. The Lord confirmed "*I come to send fire on earth"* (Luke 12: 49). He set the fire in our inner life, which will remain enflamed in us if we respond to the work of the Holy Spirit of God, to be counted as lighted lamps. But if we cover it with a vessel, or put it under a bed, instead of setting it on a lampstand, we would lose this light….. Hence the apostle says: *"Do not quench the spirit"* (1 Thessalonians 5: 17).

If the apostle called the body *"an earthen vessel"* that carries the power of God in it, as an excellent treasure (2 Corinthians 4: 7); hiding that lamp inside the vessel implies isolating the work of the Spirit through the evil desires of the body, instead of sanctifying the body by the fire of the Spirit. In other words, I wish we do not hinder the work of the Holy Spirit in us through the works of the body; but have the body with all its energies and senses sanctified by the fire of the Spirit.

If the vessel represents the body; the bed represents the life of sleep and slothfulness; for nothing would corrupt our spiritual life like slothfulness and laziness. In other words, I wish we do not quench the holy fire in us through the bed of negligence and slothfulness, but rather respond to Him through watching and strife.

The lampstand, refers to the life of preaching and testimony to the Truth; for the light in us would shine more through the spiritual ministry and the testimony to the crucified Lord.

b- What is the secret that will be revealed, and the hidden that will be known and proclaimed, but the life of the Lord Christ Himself, which He presents as seed inside us; to be planted, to grow to become a tree of life that would fill the heart with heavenly spiritual fruition that could never be hidden. The Lord Christ is proclaimed in us through our inner life, of "*love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness*" (Galatians 5: 22); which are translated through our apparent

behavior and movements! For what we receive through our secret life and personal worship, will be proclaimed through our behavior.

c- The Lord Christ presents to us, as a main principle in our spiritual life: ""*Whoever has, to him more will be given; and whoever does not have, even what he seems to have will be taken from him"* (18), which we may call "The dynamics of the fellowship with God in His Son"; namely that if we are faithful, we would receive "the life of Christ in us"; for this life would never stand idle or hard, but will perpetually grow in us. ……Having "The life in Christ in us", He would give us the perpetual growth, hoping that we would eventually reach the full stature of Christ; ……..Christ would grant us what is His, to become our own, as live seeds that give fruition in us, and the growth that unceasingly increase…… Whereas "*Whoever does not have*"; namely whoever does not receive the work of God in him, even what he assumes to have of natural talents and inherited blessings, would all be taken away from him.

In other words, our life in Christ is dynamic and never stops; and so is evil. Whoever responds to the Lord, would unceasingly grow; and whoever receives evil would continue to roll down.

4- THE LORD SEEKS ALL TO BE RELATED TO HIM:

If the Lord Christ, as a True Friend, unceasingly works in us, the Evangelist Luke intended to show the level of His friendship as close to the physical or flesh relationship; for He wishes for all of us to be His relatives, members in His heavenly household. When He was told that His mother and brothers came seeking Him and could not approach Him because of the crowd, He answered and said:

"***My mother and My brothers are these who hear the word of God and do it"*** (21)

By that the Lord Christ did not mean to belittle the familial relationships; but, while He so loves His mother, and cares for her, even in the moments He was crucified; He intends to lift us up to a relationship on the level of uniting with Him, not only as listeners to the Word, but as workers by it as well (See the interpretation of the gospel according to Mathew 12: 46; and the gospel according to Mark 3: 21).

+ The Lord did not say that, as though he denies his mother, but rather to proclaim her honor, which is set, on only on having given birth to Him, but on her enjoyment of every virtue.

(Father Theophlactius, Bishop of Bulgaria)

+ You should notice that, in every occasion, He did not deny the relationship according to the flesh, but added to it what are through virtue.

(St. John Chrysostom)

+ It is befitting of the Lord, as a Teacher, to present Himself as a Role Model to others. He commands and executes what He commands. ……While saying that "*He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me"* (Matthew 10: 37; Luke 14:26) He intended to be the first to obey this commandment, not to oppose the honor befitting to be given to the father and the mother; having said before: "*Cursed is the one who treats his father or his mother with contempt"* (Deuteronomy 2716; Exodus 20: 12); ……but He knows that "*He must be about His Father's business"* (2: 49), more than about His emotions toward His mother; Namely, to Him the bonds of the Spirit are more holy than those of the flesh.

Those who sought Jesus should not stay outside; for the Word, you hear from within, so also you see the light; hence it is said: "*The word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart that you may do it"* (Deuteronomy 30: 14; Romans 11: 8); and it is said, "*Come close to Me to be enlightened"*. ……..If He did not know His relatives according to the flesh who remained outside, how would He know us if we so remain?!

The Lord Christ could never deny His own mother; for He cared for her while on the cross (John 19: 26); but He intended to honor the divine commandments more than the bonds according to the flesh. …… By His relatives, Christ refers that, He will put the Church that believed in Him ahead of the Jews, from whom He came according to the flesh.

(St. Ambrose)

5- THE LORD CALMS DOWN THE RAGE OF THE WAVES:

Now, having showed His friendship, working unceasingly to bring all into a relationship with Him, through keeping and practicing the commandment, He started to show His authority on nature, giving command to the wind and water to be instantly obeyed, He

proclaims His possibility to work in us, even in case nature seems un-cooperating. He has the authority to enter into our hearts, as He did into the boat, to calm down the raging storms, and to set His exalted peace (See the interpretation of the gospel according to Matthew 8: 23; and of the gospel according to Mark 4: 35)

"Now it happened on a certain day, that He got into a boat with His disciples, and He said to them, 'Let us cross over to the other side of the lake', And they launched out" (22)

While His relatives according to the flesh remained outside, He departed from the location, and set forth, together with His disciples in a boat, crossing over to the other side of the lake. It is a symbolic portrait of the divine work, when the Jews, His own, remained outside, and He, together with His disciples, through His Church or His cross (the boat) set forth to the Gentiles, the other side of the lake of this world. …….. Up till now, the Lord Christ perpetually, works through His disciples in His Church, longing for the renewal of the life of all.

"But as they sailed, He fell asleep; and a windstorm came down on the lake, and they were filling with water and were i jeopardy" (23)

This is the first time it is said that the Lord "*fell asleep*"; by which the Evangelist intended to confirm the truth of His incarnation, that he ate, drank, slept, and suffered, etc. The expression *"fell asleep"* probably refers to (feeling comfortable); for entering together with His disciples into the boat of ministry, he feels comfort in them. The expression "fell asleep", here probably also refers to that when the boat of our ministry encounters a windstorm, and it is filling with water; while the Lord seems fallen asleep, not caring that we are perishing; even though He is the Almighty, and everything happening is through His permission …… His sleep is nothing but postponing His waking up to mute the tribulations; to give us the chance to strive by His grace, and to cry out seeking His help; that by Him we would conquer and be crowned.

According to St. John Chrysostom: [The Lord has fallen asleep to give His disciples the chance to discover their fear, and that He is there to deal with it in them]. Whereas, St. Augustine sees in the sleep of the Lord a symbol of the sleep of our faith in Him inside us; for "*by faith the Lord Christ dwells in our hearts"* (Ephesians 3: 17). If this faith falls asleep, and the rage of the storms is stirred up against us, there would be urgent need to wake Him up by our cry out, namely by remembering His words of activity in our life.

Commenting on the Lord falling asleep while crossing over the lake, St. Ambrose says:
[No one can cross over this world without Christ. …….. If those with whom is the Lord Christ, find difficulties in encountering the temptations of life;……. And if the Lord dealt that way with His own disciples; it would be to make you perceive that no one who forsakes this world to worship Him, and the temptations of life would not stand in his way to hinder him; so that in him the work of faith would be justified.

If even the experienced sailors may face such danger in the windstorms, to whom shall we resort except to Him about whom it is written:

"***Then He arose and rebuked the wind"*** (24).

Fallen asleep with the body, He cared for them with His Godhead. Everyone was afraid, and He alone was sound asleep undisturbed……. He partakes, not only of our nature, but is there in our midst in the time of danger, even if He seems to be asleep in the flesh, for He is awake with His Godhead.

Being worthy of reproach, He said to His disciples: "*O you, of little faith"* (Matthew 8: 26; 14: 31); for they had fear even though Jesus was with them. They did not perceive that whoever abides in Him would never perish. The Lord brought faith back to them, when he restored peace, and calmed down the waves and the winds; ……..to (whom) the archangel Michael said: "*The Lord rebuke you"* (Jude 9).

When the Lord rebukes the stirred up storms in us, we would never fear death, but the disturbance of our life would calm down.

I wish we watch, lest we see Him fall asleep in us; when our body is overcome by the sleep of slothfulness].

6- THE LORD HEALS THE DEMON-POSSESSED MAN:

We have previously presented the comments of many of the fathers of the Church on the healing of the demon-possessed man of the country of the 'Gadarenes' which is opposite Galilee. (interpretation of Mathew 8: 28; Mark 5: 1). What we want to confirm here, is that the Evangelist Luke presents the Person of the Savior as a Friend who works unceasingly for the sake of one man or two,…… even if they are out of their mind, demon-possessed, and dwelling in the tombs; ……..even if healing them would lead to the perdition of thousands of swine, or to being Himself driven out of the country. …… Yet that was how the Lord Christ evaluates the human soul; how He works in her whatever the cost is; ready to comfort her at the expense of His creation, and at the expense of how many would feel toward Him.

Who was that man who was demon-possessed for a long time, wore no clothes, lived in the tombs, kept under guard and bound in chains and shackles?! ……..He represents humanity who remained for a long time enslaved by the devil, bound by the chains of sin, and the shackles of evil, ……had no strength to work to the account of the kingdom of God, to be edified, nor to think about the heavenlies; ……bared of the garment of the divine grace; and harms herself by herself; ……..She who came to dwell out of the city, out of the paradise which was set specially for her; to be denied the dwelling with God in His true sanctuary; to be driven out into the wilderness, as she does not endure the life of love, and the fellowship with God and men.

Commenting on that man, St. Ambrose says:

[The naked man is he who lost the garment of his (early) nature, and his virtue.

The demon-possessed man refers to the Gentiles, as they were covered with transgressions, and naked by their ignorance; whom iniquities took off his clothes…… St. Matthew cared to mention that he dwelt in the tombs; for the bodies of un-believers are nothing but some kinds of tombs in which the dead souls are buried, for not having the Word of the Lord dwelling in them.

"He set forth to the wilderness", namely to the places barren of the virtues of the Spirit, dwelt by those who went astray from the law, and from the prophets, and were consequently rejected by the grace……. He was tormented, not by a single demon, but by a legion of them].

So it was, as humanity became a toy in the hand, not of one demon, but of many, to play with in turn to humiliate her. Then the Lord came out to liberate her from that enemy, to give her back her royal attire and the divine dwelling place; to grant her reason, wisdom, and fellowship with Him.

Counting that the salvation of man by the Lord's hand, is perdition to him, the enemy, finding pleasure in our suffering, and torment in our salvation; says: "***I beg You not to torment me"*** (28); for he probably perceived that at the ultimate end of the salvation work, he will fall under judgment, for his cup would be full to the rim.

Anyway, even in spite of the violence and cruelty shown by the devil, as apparent in the way of life of that demon-possessed man before he was healed, and in the herd of swine that perished; yet, before the Lord, he, according to St. John Chrysostom, could not enter into one swine, unless allowed to do by the Lord.

I wish we, in our spiritual life, would not be like "*a sow, wallowing* in the mire of sin, lest we would be swept by the enemy, down to the pit, to drown and to perish.

Finally, the man who was healed, seeking from the Lord to let him stay in His company, the Lord answered him:

"***Return to your own house ad tell what great things God has done for You"*** (39).

According to St. John Chrysostom: [Let us retreat from all the world things, and dedicate ourselves to Christ, to be counted equal to the apostles – according to His proclamation – and to enjoy the eternal life]. ……In other words, I wish we do not care for the outer appearances, but retreat to our new house, namely to "our life with Christ", to practice our right in worship and testimony, for God to be glorified in us, and His works to appear as light on the world.

7- THE LORD HEALS THE WOMAN WITH THE FLOW OF BLOOD:

We have already talked about that episode in our interpretation of the gospel of Matthew 9: 18, and the gospel of Mark 5: 22; But we would like to draw the attention here to that healing that woman came on the way between the Lord's encounter with Jairus, and raising his daughter from the dead ……While on His way to Jairus' house; which was for a specific goal, to show that Jairus, even though he was the ruler of the synagogue, but his faith was weaker than that of the pagan Roman centurion; for the former asked the Lord to come to his house to heal his daughter who was dying; whereas the later had faith that the Lord is able to heal his servant from afar by uttering just a word, and therefore, there was no need to trouble Him to come to his house, particularly that he felt unworthy for Him to enter under his roof.

Yet, it is obvious that with Jairus' heart, being so disturbed, and as the situation was so critical, he was anxious for the Lord to hasten to go to his house before his daughter dies; taking into consideration, as well, that he did not believe in the raising from the dead. ……Who can imagine how he felt when the Lord stopped the whole procession to say: "***Who touched Me?"*** (45)…… But by that, the Lord had the intention to give Jairus a lesson in faith, by showing to him how an unknown foreign woman took the divine power by force through only touching the hem of his robe, and got what the multitudes have not; and proclaiming to him the possibility to enjoy the work and power of the Messiah.

Most probably, while setting forth to the house of Jairus, the Lord intended to give him, as well as to the multitude, a lesson in "His active Friendship"; namely, that while caring for the ruler of the synagogue, He did not disregard an unknown foreign woman, defiled by her flow of blood, according to the law; to show how He works to the account of all, and for the sake of all.

We showed how He is the Friend who unceasingly works to the account of the ruler of the synagogue who came to beg Him to come to his house to heal his daughter, and at the same time to the account of an unknown woman; …… how He works publicly by setting forth to Jairus' house, and in secret , saying:

"***Somebody touched Me, for I perceived power going out of Me"*** (46).

On another aspect, He intended to confirm that there is no specific time for work, but all His time is dedicated for work; by healing, while on the way to heal.

That woman who, even though, has lost hope in the human hands (she spent all her money on physicians), did not lose her trust and faith in the Savior; and by touching his robe she got what the multitude who thronged and pressed Him have not. ……Intending to be glorified in her, the Lord proclaimed that He perceived that power has gone out of Him.

"***Now when the woman saw that she was not hidden, she came trembling and falling down before Him, she declared to Him in the presence of all the people the reason she had touched Him and how she was healed immediately"*** (47)

The Lord did not mean to rebuke, but rather to justify her, as she came to represent the Church that bears the fear of God, worship in truth, and testifies to the work of her Christ.

Before such a scene that drew the hearts of all, the Greatest Friend flooded her with more of His love by saying:

"***Daughter! Be of good cheer, your faith has made you well; Go in peace"*** (48)

She had faith, and He increased her faith more and more, by saying to her "*Be of good cheer"*; for faith is a gift from God to whoever seeks it; so is the increase in faith for whoever practices faith. …… He grants us faith if we seek it from Him, and increases it if we kindle what He gave us.

Beside granting her the increase of faith, He also proclaimed giving her the gift of "Sonhood" by addressing her: "***Daughter";*** a gift that surpasses every other gift or talent…….. While she believed, got, and glorified Him by her faith, He, in turn, glorified her by saying: "*Your faith had made you well"……* And finally, He gave her the gift of spiritual peace, by saying to her: "*Go in peace"*…….. How amazing: How He, as a Friend, cared for healing her body, and for her soul by giving her peace, and for her spirit, by granting her to become a daughter partaking of His heavenly glories.

8-RAISING THE DAUGHTER OF JAIRUS:

After having been much disturbed at first for fear that the delay would cost him his daughter's life, Jairus, Watching that scene, became filled with faith; the woman with the flow of blood became a teacher for the ruler of the synagogue on the way to faith.

Yet the Lord, intending to increase Jairus' faith more and more, allowed for him to pass through a more bitter anguish; as: ***"someone came from the ruler of the synagogue's house, saying to him: 'your daughter is dead, Do not trouble the Teacher"***(49); But before uttering a word, he heard the Lord saying to him: "***Do not be afraid, only believe; and she will be made well"*** (50).

We have already talked about raising the daughter of Jairus from the dead in our interpretation of the gospel according to Matthew 9, and of the gospel according to Mark 5.

==========.

CHAPTER 9

OUR HEAVENLY FRIEND AND HIS DISCIPLES

Having seen in the Lord Christ the Friend Lover of all mankind, who unceasingly works to make us receive His friendship, with, and in us; this chapter presents to us the goal of this friendship, which is His transfiguration in His believers and ministers, to declare His heavenly nature in our life. He became poor to make us rich, and partook of our sufferings to carry us to His riches and heavenly glories.

The Lord did not present the glories of His transfiguration all at once, but, having chosen His twelve disciples, He transfigured in their life a step at a time, to proclaim the authority of His kingdom through sending them without any temporal possibilities, but provided them with His authority to heal the bodies and souls. He granted them to get in touch with His transfiguration and His heavenly possibilities through how Herod was perplexed from afar; how He fed the hungry multitudes; and how God the Father proclaimed Himself to Simon Peter. ……..Finally, talking to them about the cross, He took with Him three of His disciples, to have the privilege of watching His splendor on Mount Tabor. And after that seen transfiguration, for fear lest they would be overcome by pride, He talked to them about their commitment to be crucified and to walk with the spirit of humility, together with serving the others through taking the narrow road

1- The Lord ***sends*** His disciples to preach the kingdom of God 1 - 6
2- Herod got perplexed 7 - 9
3- The disciples and feeding the multitudes 10 - 18
4- The disciples and recognizing the Person of the Lord 19 - 21
5- The disciples and the crucifixion 22 - 27
6- The disciples and the glory of the transfiguration 28 - 36
7- The disciples and casting out the evil spirits 37 - 43
8- The disciples and the betrayal of the Son of Man 44 - 45
9- The disciples and humility 46 -48
10- The disciples and serving the others 49 - 50
11- The disciples and asking for fire from heaven 51 - 56
12- The conditions of the discipleship to the Lord 57 - 62

1- THE LORD SENDS HIS DISCIPLES TO PREACH THE KINGDOM OF GOD:

As we have already talked about this subject in our interpretation of the gospel according to Matthew 10: 1; and the gospel according to Mark 6: 7. Here, we shall only show that the Lord Christ, as a heavenly Friend, came down to our earth, dwelt with us, and chose His disciples from among the illiterates to transfigure in them, proclaiming Himself through His possibilities He presented to them, which are:

a- ***Then He called His twelve disciples together"*** (1)
This divine 'call' for discipleship, even though it bears no commitment to respond to publicly, yet it involves an invitation to His beloved; …… But in the eyes of those who accept it, it represents a deputation through which the deputy or the steward works in the name of His (employer), to his account, and by his possibilities. Through this call, the disciples received a new position, to work as stewards of the secrets of God.

b- "***and gave them power and authority over all demons, and to cure diseases"*** (1)

Having appointed them as stewards of His secrets, He gave them power and authority over all demons, and to cure the sick.

Many have the authority through their positions as kings, rulers, elites, and judges; but, having no power within themselves, they abuse their positions, as well as themselves. The Lord Christ, on the other hand,

together with the authority, He gave power to His disciples, which is not set upon outer temporal appearances, but it is “His Holy Spirit” who dwells in them, and works by them.

Even though the devil claimed authority for himself, supported in it by the weakness of humanity that bowed down to have him reign over them, to called “the prince or ruler of this world” (John 12: 31); as well as “the strong” (or “the strong” (Matthew12: 29)……., yet his authority came through perversion, and set upon his deception of men, and their weakness. To overcome such an enemy, the disciples were committed to carry an authority supported by the divine power.

c- **“*He sent them to preach the kingdom of God, and to heal the sick”*** (2)

This possibility involving “the power of preaching the kingdom of God” is not just a talk of philosophy, and a call to piety, but an enjoyment of the kingdom within the soul. Or in other words, the apostolic preaching is a gift presented by the Holy Spirit, by which He moves the soul from the darkness to the kingdom of light, to enjoy, through the water of baptism, the sonhood to God; and to turn their inner soul into a heaven, holy for the Lord.

d- ***And He said to them, ‘Take nothing for the journey, neither staffs nor bag nor bread nor money; and do not have two tunics apiece”*** (3)

He sought from the disciples to practice the “forsaking”, not to live in deprivation, but in order that the Lord would become everything for them. …….. It is amazing how, before seeking from them to “forsake, He granted them the authority, the power to preach, and to heal the sick,”; for, by having Him, with all His possibilities, they would reject all the worthless temporal things.

He commanded them to take nothing: neither staffs nor bag, nor bread, nor silver, not to have two tunics apiece; a commandment befitting of those who enter a temple, or a sanctuary of the Lord, not to carry with them what belong to this world, so as not to be confused or preoccupied with anything other than God. ……. It is, therefore befitting of the disciples to have their whole life “a presence with God in His sanctuary”; to perpetually feel, wherever they are, as though in divine sanctuaries.

We pray to God to grant us such a feeling that fills the heart with the holy fear, and lifts the soul up to live as though in heaven; not to be confused by the things of this world, nor need a staff, bag, bread, silver, nor to have two tunics apiece,

e- ***“Whatever house you enter, stay there, and from there depart”*** (4)

Finding all the houses of the believers open before him, as though his own, the disciple would dwell in any of them, like one of the household, would partake of their regular daily food; and stays there until it is time for him to depart.

This commandment probably presents to the minister a commitment not to abuse the love of people for him in Christ, nor to turn it into compliments; that his life there would turn into banquets, instead of concentration upon preaching the word of God and His gospel.

Not to move from one house to another, will take away from the families, the spirit of competition in giving hospitality, for which countries of the east are reputed, up to this very day

Finally, He probably intended for the house, to be a nucleus for a church in the city, where the believers would come to encounter the apostles, and there to worship, and specifically to practice the sacrament of communion (the Eucharist) in the first day of every week.

On the contrary,

"*W**hoever will not receive you, when you go out of that city, shake off the very dust from your feet as a testimony against them"*(5)

So did Barnabas and Paul when they departed from Antioch (Acts 12: 51). By such a command He probably means that temporal things however important they may seem, are just like dust that have no place except on the feet. ……A minister, whose spiritual word is rejected by men, will have to reject, as well, anything of their worthless temporal things. The church does not seek money, but shakes it off her feet; she only seeks souls. The bishops and the priests are urged to reject gifts from the unrepentant wicked, as though shaking off the dust on their threshold as a testimony against them, to exhort them to repent.

According to St. Ambrose: That dust refer to the weaknesses that is befitting of the Shepherd to carry on behalf of the people of God, according to the words of the apostle: "*Who is weak, and I am not weak?"* (2 Corinthians 11:9). But he should not let these weaknesses cling to him, but cast them underneath his feet, saying: [It is the duty of the preacher of the gospel to carry the physical weaknesses of the believers away and crush them underneath his feet like dust].

2- HEROD GOT PERPLEXED:

Having been granted the privilege to work to the account of their heavenly Friend, the Lord intended to reveal to His disciples, a step at a time, His authority and possibilities. Here, the Evangelist Luke narrates how Herod got perplexed when he heard about the news of the Lord Christ and His works. And, being a Sadducee, who does not believe in the resurrection from the dead, how the events made him change his views, and said: "*John I have beheaded, but who is this of whom I hear such things?"* (9). He started to doubt whether He was John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the old prophets, who had risen again?! As his conscience began to stir up in him; he did not refer the killing of John the Baptist to the deception of 'Herodias' or her daughter, nor to the swordsman, but to himself, saying "*John I have beheaded";* ……and he sought to see Jesus.

All that came upon Herod through hearing about the works of the Lord Christ , even though nobody ever addressed to him a word of rebuke, nor preached to him a good tiding…….. But we can say that, if the voice of John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Lord, and who came to prepare the way before Him, was not muted, even after being beheaded, but remained active, bringing terror into the heart of Herod; How much more would be the word of the Lord Christ itself, and preaching it through His disciples?! Which, according to the apostle Paul it could not be restrained.

3-THE DISCIPLES AND FEEDING THE MULTITUDES:

The disciples received the call, enjoyed the power and the authority, and saw by their own eyes, and heard by their own ears, how Herod was perplexed and was about to collapse ……. Now, the Lord proclaims to them that He is the One to feed the hungry multitudes…… As we have already talked about this miracle in our interpretation of the gospel according to Mathew (14) and to Mark (6), we shall only mention the following points:

a- ***"Then (the Lord) took (His disciples), and went aside privately into a deserted place belonging to the city, called Bethsaida; but when the multitudes knew it, they followed Him, and He received them, and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and healed those who had need of healing"*** (10, 11)

The disciples were in need to sit privately with the Lord, yet the multitudes did not let them, for they followed the Lord and He received them, namely welcomed them. For His comfort and that of His disciples is in comforting the tired and satisfying the hungry souls.

b- This miracle came after choosing the disciples and sending them to preach, to proclaim the goal of this mission, which is "satisfying the hungry humanity".

Commenting on the position of this miracle among the events going on around, St. Ambrose said: [The reason why the Evangelist mentioned the death of John the Baptist (Herod referred to his death) (9), is probably because the gospel intended to satisfy the hungry souls started by the end of the law.

He presented the food after healing the woman with the flow of blood – the symbol of the Church -- and after sending the disciples on their mission to preach the kingdom of God.

Let us contemplate in those who enjoyed the banquet……. They were not the lazy who dwell in the city, like those in the synagogue, who sought the honors of the world; but those who seek Christ in the wilderness …….. those whom Christ "receives" and to whom the Word of God speaks, not about the world, but about the kingdom of heaven. And in case there are among them, those who had need of healing, He healed them.

It was God's will to satisfy the hunger of those whom He healed of their painful wounds, and to grant them the spiritual food; for no one can enjoy the heavenly banquet, unless he is healed first: …… whoever was lame got the strength to walk to come to God the Father; and whoever lost the light of vision, did not enter into the house of the Lord except after he got his eyesight back. …… That is how the Lord does all the time: He first gives the forgiveness of sins and the healing of wounds; then prepares the heavenly banquets. …….The hearts hungry for the steadfast faith, will not be satisfied except by the body and blood of Christ.

c- ***"and healed those who had need of healing"*** (11)

He only healed those who felt the need to be healed and who sought the Physician. Our Physician is always ready, and is capable to heal, but He does not grant His gifts except to those who seek it, lest they would probably despise the gift.

We may probably wonder: 'What shall I do, if I do not feel an infirmity?'……. Do as the multitudes did: follow the Lord to listen to Him, you will then feel hungry for Him, and feel your need to be satisfied; and even if you do not ask Him, the disciples will ask Him on your behalf. ……. We are in need to sit together with them to listen to His voice through His gospel to feel our need to be healed and to be satisfied. According to St. Ambrose: [Once man starts by listening to Him, he will feel hungry, and the disciples who will see it, even though they, themselves, cannot satisfy his hunger, they will ask the Lord to do].

d- ***:When the day began to wear away, the twelve came and said to the Lord: Send the multitude away that they may go into the surrounding towns and country, and lodge and get provisions, for we are in a deserted place her"*** (12).

Out of human emotion, and according to human account, the disciples assumed that feeding such large multitude needs a plenty of money……. According to St. Ambrose: [They still did not understand that the food for believers is not to be purchased, but, Christ knows how to provide us with redemption, and with a free banquet].

e- Commenting on the food presented by Christ to us, lest we may fail on the way, and would not be able to reach God the Father, St. Ambrose proclaims that the food presented by the Lord is strong enough to support us on the way; and in case we do fail, the reason would be in us, for by our slothfulness, we may scatter the power He has granted us…….. The prophet Elijah could walk forty days, supported by one meal provided for him by the angel, and did not fail, the way he previously did on his own. ……. The banquet provided by Christ will support us all the days of our life.

f- Finally, We have already studied the symbolic significance of the 5000 men who were satisfied by the five loaves of bread, and the two fish, etc. ……. What we intend to make clear here, is that the disciples , having received the blessing from the hand of the Savior, have, not only satisfied the multitude, but twelve baskets of the left over fragments remained, one for each disciple, as a practical testimony for the work of

the Lord through them. …….. When the believer gives to the others, they will be satisfied, and his own hands will be filled with the blessings of the Lord; meaning that giving increases the blessings of the Lord in our life.

4-THE DISCIPLES AND RECOGNIZING THE PERSON OF THE LORD:

"And it happened as He was alone praying, that His disciples joined Him, and He asked them: 'Who do the crowd say that I am?'" (18)

Having encountered the multitudes, spoke to them, healed their wounds, and satisfied their hunger; …… but with His disciples, He entered into a secluded retreat, that when they Him pray, they will perceive His unique relationship with His Father; and to teach them that prayer is the way to enjoy the secrets of the Father and the Son; hence came the question: *"Who do the crowd say that I am?",* to be followed by another question:

"***And who do you say, that I am?"*** (20)

Even though, together with the multitude we enjoy hearing His divine words, and be satisfied with His amazing works, Yet He intends for us to sit with Him alone to enjoy His divine secrets, to present Himself to us on a personal level; to say with apostle Peter:

"***The Christ of God"*** (20).

According to St. Ambrose: [This name covers everything, expresses His nature, and includes all virtues]. We have already talked about this conversation between the Lord and His disciples with some details in our interpretation of the gospel according to Matthew 16: 13; and to Mark 8: 27), together with some comments by the fathers.

5-THE DISCIPLES AND THE CROSS:

As the apostle Peter proclaimed his faith in the Lord Christ, He strictly warned and commanded them to tell this to no one, saying:

"***The Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day"*** (22)

By this command to His disciples, He meant to postpone the proclamation of His Person until the events of the crucifixion and the resurrection are fulfilled. …… While He did not want to hinder those *events, 'for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory"* (1 Corinthians 2: 8); at the same time, He intended to proclaim His Person to His disciples, lest they would probably be offended by His crucifixion; and warned them to tell this to no one until the crucifixion is fulfilled.

The revelation of His Person actually merged with the cross; for the sacrifice of the cross would be of no value, unless the Person of the Son of God as the only begotten Son of God, and His Holy Christ, is proclaimed. And We cannot enjoy the Person of the Messiah as the Son of God, outside the cross.

If the Lord Christ is our heavenly Friend; He came to carry us by His love to His cross; for there, we rather recognize Him, receive Him, and abide in Him as members of His body, and enter into the bosom of His Father.

And we cannot recognize His cross, except by carrying it, together with the Lord, as a daily experience of godliness; hence His talk about His crucifixion merged with His talk about our own daily crucifixion, together with Him; or about carrying His cross, and enjoying the fellowship with His passion; according to the words said by the Evangelist:

"Then He said to them all: 'If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me'"(23)

Here, He reveals Himself to us, lest we would probably become offended by His cross; and He draws us to His cross, to share His passion every day with joy, to be counted worthy of the fellowship of His glories. ……. That is the heart

desire of every apostle, and of every believer: "*that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death"* (Philippians3: 10).

According to St. Jerome: [His cross is the pillar of humanity. ……..Whenever I say "The cross", I do not think about the (tree), but about the passion……..And if your soul is not ready to carry the cross, as it is the case with Me (namely with Christ), you cannot be My disciple……Blessed is he who carries in his heart, the cross and the resurrection, to become the place of the crucifixion and the resurrection of Christ! ……. Blessed is he who has Bethlehem in his heart, where Christ is born every day! ……Christ is crucified in us every day, and we to the world ……Blessed is he in whom Christ resurrects every day! For He resurrects if the sinner repents his sins, even those he unintentionally commits].

The cross does not destroy our life, as long as we carry it with Christ, who has overcome death; in other words, as long as it is carried by Christ who dwells in us. …… While outside Christ, the cross destroys the soul, in Christ it is the way to salvation and resurrection. Hence the Lord Christ Himself says:

"For whoever desires to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it" (24)

Namely, Whoever desires to save his life, or to glorify it by its eternal resurrection, is committed to destroy it through carrying the cross together with its Savior; For the cross, even though it carries, on the outside, the portrait of perdition, yet it is rather the grantor of salvation.

This divine phrase has drawn the attention of many scholars of new education, in their researches concerning the best way to raise the children. It revealed to them the concept of the true parental love. ……..No one can save his children unless he destroys the 'ego' in himself; for many so love themselves, or rather love themselves in their children; that they, intending to conform their children according to their own desires, intentions, and longings; regardless of the minds, talents, and possibilities of their children, they are actually captivating their children in the prison of their own 'self', from which they would not be able to set themselves free. …… We can say that, being crucified together with Christ, we deny ourselves, to live as living members in the body of Christ. And here, we should not captivate our children in our own 'ego', but feel them as persons, and members, together with us, in the One Body of Christ; have their own independent personalities, talents, energies, and possibilities, put and kindled in them by the Holy Spirit of God Himself; …….All we can do is to serve them, and direct them with true and unselfish love.

The cross is therefore, the secret of life of every member in his own life, in his familial relationships, and in his Church and social relationships ……. As he lives, giving in the Lord, He does not seek anything for himself, to gain everything. The more he denies himself, the more his soul would grow with love, God would transfigure in him; and would become the object of love of heaven, as well as the earth. Hence, St. Augustine confirms that we have to bring our 'ego' to perdition to gain our souls.

Again He talks to us about the cross in another way saying:

"For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and is himself destroyed or lost?" (25)

By the "world" here, he does not mean its inhabitants, but its material and mental things. As according to St. Augustine: [By living by the spirit of selfishness (the love of self); concentrated around himself, set forth to acquire the things of this world to his own account, intends for it to submit to his own pleasures; works to the account of his own riches, honor, and the desires of his body; Man loses his love for himself, as he destroys it…… Whereas he who accepts to be crucified together with Christ, deny himself, set forth out of his 'ego', to die with love for the others, and to have his heart wide open to endure and to serve the others, gains all to himself! ……. Let us, therefore, die to live! …….. Let us be buried together with the seeds, to give fruition s: thirty, sixty and hundredfold! …….For the cross is a profit and not a loss, as long as it represents a fellowship with the Crucified.

That was how the lord Christ spoke to us about our crucifixion together with Him, something that is difficult for man to perceive; hence He says:

"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 in His Father's, and of the holy angels" (26)

According to the scholar Tertullian: [I will be safe if I am not ashamed of my Lord ……..The Son of Man was crucified, a fact of which I am not ashamed, even if the other people are. The Son of God died; and I believe that in every way]. Being ashamed of the Lord Christ and His cross may be by words, as well as by work. For whoever does not carry the features of the Lord Christ, walks by His Spirit, and accepts His passion, would be ashamed of Him and His cross.

So the crucified Lord Christ exhorts us to receive Him in our daily life, so as to be able to experience His glories, to be counted together with Him as heirs to God, and to be honored by the heavenly hosts . Such an experience of the glories that we reach through the cross, is not only an estachological experience that we taste in the world to come, but is a living experience we enjoy its deposit now.. Hence the Lord ends His talk concerning the sufferings that grant glories by saying:

"But I tell you truly, that there are some standing here, who shall not taste death till they see the kingdom of God" (27).

By those words, He probably meant the three disciples He took with Him to Mount Tabor to see His glory in the moments of transfiguration; on account of that the talk about the transfiguration came directly after it…….Or He probably meant the disciples who saw the kingdom of God proclaimed among the peoples of the world; …….. According to St. Ambrose, they are probably the believers who have seen heaven, like the apostle Paul; …….. We may also say that this divine promise touches everyone of us, when the kingdom of God is transfigured in the soul ,to take away from her, death and corruption, and grants her the heavenly splendor in the Lord; …….While according to some Christians of Jewish origin, it probably refers to the Jews who remain scattered in this world, until when the kingdom of God is proclaimed to them at the end of time, by their return from their denial of the Lord Christ (See also our interpretation of Matthew 16: 28; and Mark 9: 1).

6-THE DISCIPLES AND THE GLORY OF THE TRANFIGURATION:

We may say, without exaggeration that the goal of the gospel is our enjoyment of the transfiguration of the Lord Christ in His Church, in everyone of her members; namely in the depths of our souls; until we set forth to the perfect proclamation of His glory in the great day of the Lord. For if the cross, the resurrection, and the ascension, represent one integral work that occupies the center of our faith, the Lord Christ, in His crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension, intends to grant us the spiritual insight to see Him transfigured in us, to experience Him amid our tribulations, crucified for us, to present to us the joy of His resurrection, and the glories of His heavens in our inner depths.

In other words, if we strive, it is for that, by faith, the Lord Christ would be proclaimed in us; to see Him face to face, transfigured in the perfection of His splendor in the great day of the Lord.

We have previously spoke about the transfiguration in our interpretation of the gospel according to Matthew 17; and of Mark 9) in more detail, with the comments of the fathers. Here we shall have that according to St. Ambrose who says: [Peter and those with him saw that grace, even though they were heavy with sleep, on account of that the infinite splendor of the Godhead crushes us. For if the human eye cannot hold her stare on the glare of the sun, how much more would the human body endure the glory of God?! That is why in the resurrection, the human body will be clothed with a form more pure and light, free of its shortcomings. After such a heavy sleep, fully awake, the disciples saw His glory. …… It is, as well, befitting of us to wake up to see the greatness of Christ. Peter exulted, as the greatness of the present time could not take his attention away from the magic of the resurrection, hence he said:

"Master, it is good for us to be here" (33), as an example of the time to come; and Paul said: "*I have the desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better"* (Philippians 1: 23)]……. In the transfiguration it is to be noticed:

a- Because of the importance of the transfiguration, the three Evangelist talked much about it; while John, on the other hand, did very concisely, yet strongly and with conviction; saying: "*We beheld His glory"* (John 1: 14). Configuration probably would never depart from Peter's heart and mind all along the days of his preaching, counting it as a sign of truth of the Messianic mission; and binding between the transfiguration and the power of the splendor of Jesus Christ on His coming;……."*We beheld His glory",* for He took after God the Father , honor and glory; as confirmed by the voice that came from high above, saying: "***This is My***

beloved Son, (in whom I am well pleased)hear Him" (35). *"We heard this voice which came from heaven, when we were with Him on the holy mountain"* (2 Peter 1: 16 – 18).

b- If the transfiguration took place eight days after the Lord's talk with His disciples about the cross; Even in the moments of the transfiguration, "*Moses and Elijah spoke of His decease which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem"* (31). The transfiguration of the Lord in us, or our enjoyment of the fellowship of His splendor and glory in us, is the fruition of our acceptance of His cross in our life; and of that the cross will remain the subject of our preoccupation , even in the midst of the moments of the transfiguration. In other words, we shall not enjoy the transfiguration of the Lord in us in this world, nor the appearance of His glory to us in the ultimate day, unless we receive the commandment of the crucifixion together with Him. And when we enjoy His transfiguration here and there, the cross will remain the subject of our joy and eternal praise. So the cross will be melded with the glory; and the glory will proclaim the power of the cross, and its divine secret.

c- The Church cares for the transfiguration, celebrates it as a major feast, being a true testimony of His Godhead, hidden under the veil of the body, which the Lord proclaimed to some of His disciples, as much as they could endure, to let them perceive what the Church enjoys in eternity in an unutterable exalted way.

In this transfiguration, we see what thje Lord grants us as a gift when He changes the nature of our body of dust to a spiritual body, and raises us from our corruption to non-corruption, through our unity with Him and our enjoyment of His eternal inheritance; As according to the apostle: "*Who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body"* Philippians 3: 21…….. But the transfiguration of the Lord is a proclamation of His truth hidden from us because of our weakness, presented to us as much as we can endure. Whereas our own glory is a free gift He grants to us.

d- ***"As He prayed, the appearance of His face was altered"*** (29)

As we already said, the gospel according to Luke is the gospel of "prayers"; but our Lord Jesus' prayer is the talk of fellowship with the Father, One with Hoim in Godhead, and not the talk of him whom God adopted as a gift. …… Our Lord Jesus carried us with Him to the mountain; and our behalf He prayed; to teach us that, if we intend to be altered in appearance, and to enjoy the transfiguration of the Lord in our depths, we are committed to go up with Him to the mountain to pray….. For there is no other way to transfiguration without prayer.

7-THE DISCIPLES AND CASTING OUT THE EVIL SPIRITS:

Taking with Him three of His disciples to the holy mountain to proclaim to them His nature as a heavenly Friend, to whom the Father Himself testifies that He is the only begotten Son, in whom He is pleased; and in whom the prophesies are fulfilled, and the law is realized; He was also joined by Moses and Elijah, who came exultant for His coming, and to talk to Him about His crucifixion, namely His departure. In Him those who still strive rejoice, and seek to stay with Him on the mountain forever; and in Him those who departed rejoice as well…… He is the subject of peace to heaven and earth, and their reconciliation by His blood; For He came down to the plains to transfigure in another way, through His divine work, by driving out the evil spirits who destroyed the life of man. He came to carry humanity to His transfiguration and to the enjoyment of His glories; but that would not be realized except by liberating it from its bondage to the devil and his hosts. …….. The Lord came down from the mountain to the plains, to find a son possessed by the devil who threw him down and convulsed him (42), that he became the cause of bitterness to his father, relatives, and all those around him.

We may say that our heavenly Friend, the only begotten Son of God the Father, by His ascending the mountain and His transfiguration, He proclaimed in a way or another, humanity melded with Him to enjoy the fellowship of His glories, to bring pleasure to the Father and joy to the heavenly creatures; and in her the Word of God is fulfilled, and the prophesies are realized. …….. Whereas the son on the plains, captivated by the devil, on the other hand,

represents humanity that brought sorrow to the heart of the Father, and lost her fellowship with the heavenlies by her disobedience.

"Teacher! I implore You, look on my son, for he is my only child" (38)

Those strong words uttered by the father, were full of bitterness, as well as with wisdom. On one aspect, he sought from the Savior, only to "look"; a request that carries faith in the love of the Savior who cannot endure to see anyone suffering, particularly a father for the sake of his only son; and on another aspect, while proclaiming his identity as the father, yet he admits his helplessness, "*for he nis my only son";* and he also presented an admonishment, saying:

So I implored Your disiples to cast it out, but they could not" (40)

Now what did the Lord Christ do?

a- He admonished the multitudes, saying: ***"O faithless and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you and bear with you?"*** (410. ……. For He desired to have a faithful generation that terrify the demons!
b- He said to the father: ***"Bring your son here"*** (41)…….. He requests from every believer to look on the destroyed and captive souls, as his own children, to present nto the Lord through prayers, to enjoy salvation.
c- **"Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the child, and gave him back to his father"** (42). …….It is not enough to drive the enemy away from the place he took by force, but to give the place back to its owner. In other words, the goal of our Christ is not only to liberate us from the devil, but to bring us back into the bosom of our heavenly Father, to enjoy together with Him the divine bosoms.

8- THE DISCIPLES AND THE BETRAYAL OF THE SON OF MAN:

"He said to His disciples, 'Let these words sink down into your ears, for the Son of Man is about to be betrayed into the hands of men'" (44).

For the second time the Lord Christ spoke to His disciples about His crucifixion, after Moses and Elijah spoke to Him concerning the same subject…….. While the multitudes were amazed at the majesty, the power and authority of the Lord, , and while everyone marveled at all the things that Jesus did,healing the possessed child from the unclean spirit; He intended to keep the hearts of His disciples from being drawn to temporal glories, but to the cross, as a proclamation of His authority in the salvation of humanity. But even though His words about the cross were clear, yet they did not understand; for through a divine ordinance, the secret of the cross was hidden from them until it is realized.

9-THE DISCIPLES AND HUMILITY:

While not understanding the talk of the Lord Christ that He is about to be delivered to crucifixion, as a way to His heavenly kingdom, on the contrary,

"A dispute arose among them as to which of them would be greatest. And Jesus, perceiving the thought of their heart, took a little child and set him by Him, abs said to them, 'whoever receives this child in My name receives Me, and whoever receives Me receives Him who sent Me; for he who is least among you all will be great" (48).

Being a heavenly Friend who reigns, not through the temporal greatness, and self-esteem, but through love ; the Lord wished for His disciples to carry His features, to reign together with Him by the spirit with humility.

Warning against pride, in his talk entitled :"Against the thoughts of the eight evil desires", Father Oghris said: [The spirit of vain glory is the worst of thoughts, that intends to grow in the souls of those who practice virtue; leading them to show off publicly their strife, seeking the commendation of men; claiming that they could heal women, cast the evil spirits, and that the multitudes gather together to touch their robes ……Such pride is the cause of utterly destroying the souls of men].

And exhorting us to have humility, Father Dorotheos said: [Let us, as well, have humility to be saved. …. In case we cannot endure to bear many troubles, because of our weakness, let us then be humble; for I truly believe that the little worl done with humility, makes us, by the mercy of God, be in the same place earned by the saints after so much labor, as true ministers of God…… Yes! We are weak and unable to do many things, but can't we be humble?!..... Indeed, beloved brethren, blessed is he who is truly humble] …….. (See the sayings of the fathers in our interpretation of the gospel according to Matthew 18: 1, and of Mark 9: 35).

10-THE DISCIPLES AND SERVING THE OTHERS:

"Now John answered and said: 'Master, we saw someone casting demons in Your name, and we forbade him, because he does not follow with us'. But Jesus said to him: 'Do not forbid him, for he who is not against us is on our side" (49, 50)

As we said in our interpretation of the gospel according to Mark 9: 38, the Evangelist John did not forbid that man out of jealousy or envy, but because he longed for him to join them in following the Lord Christ. And it is obvious from the answer of the Lord, that that man was not against Christ, neither by his mouth, nor by his heart, but, even though his circumstances probably did not allow him to follow the disciples in an apparent way; yet he was one of them in faith.

Any way, our heavenly Friend, by His words, presents to us a new concept of the holy congregation; that it is not just a physical encounter, but is a unity of life and faith. The Lord intended in His disciples to have a heart wide with love, and to long for all to practice their talents to the account of the kingdom of God with no bigotry ….. but in the unity of faith, and of an upright spiritual spirit.

11-THE DISCIPLES AND COMMANDING FIRE TO COME DOWN FROM HEAVEN:

"Now it came to pass, when the time had come for Him to be received up, that He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem; and sent messengers before His face. And they went, they entered a village of the Samaritans, to prepare for Him. But they did not receive Him, because His face was set for the journey to Jerusalem. And when His disciples James and John saw this, they, said, 'Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, just as Elijah did?' But He turned and rebuked them, and said, 'You do not know what manner of spirit you are of. For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives but to save them'; and they went to another village" (51 – 56).

a- Saying: "*When the time had come for Him to be received up",* (51), the Evangelist used the same expression "*to be received up"*, used when Elijah was taken up to heaven (2 kings 2: 9-11); in glorifying the suffering servant by Isaiah(Isaiah 42: 1), and in the ascension of the Lord Christ up to heaven (Acts 1: 2, 11)……..When the time had come to be glorified by entering into passion as a slave, to cross over to His glories ascending to heaven, the Lord Christ steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem, the location where He was to be tried, and crucified; to suffer on our behalf, to glorify us with, by, and in Him.

He set forth to Jerusalem, as though hastening the events anticipated by all the generations, being the work of salvation of God, by which the believers are glorified.

b- A village of the Samaritans did not receive Him. We know that the Samaritans were foreigners brought by Babylon to dwell in the place of those captivated from Israel in the year 721 BC; Their worship was a mixture of Jewish and pagan; and accepted only the five books of Moses of the Old Testaments. There was animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans all the time.

Seeing how that Samaritan village did not receive the Savior, James and John asked the Lord Christ to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, the way Elijah did before (2 kings 1: 10, 11)…… Probably because of this fiery attitude, "*the Lord called the two sons of Zebedee "Boanerges", that is (sons of thunder*" (Mark 3: 17). But the Lord refused their request, and rebuked them because of it; saying that He has come, not to destroy but to save ……With such longsuffering, He anticipated the repentance of all, and it actually so happened that Samaria eventually received faith (Acts 8: 3: 17).

The Lord Christ came, not to catch the souls to faith by force, but by love and longsuffering. According to St. John Chrysostom: [whoever receives faith out of fear, will soon forsake it; whereas whoever received it through love and compassion will abide in it].

While the two disciples sought fire from heaven to consume, the Lord presents Himself a heavenly Friend, like dew that quench the fire of evil desires. And in case He sends His fiery Holy Spirit, He does to enflame the heart for love, and not for revenge].

3- THE CONDITIONS FOR THE DISCIPLESHIP TO THE LORD:

While our heavenly Friend opens His arms wide longing to embrace all to Him to enjoy the fellowship of His glories; He will not send fire to consume those who reject Him. …….. At the same time, not everyone is fitting to be His disciple, but only him who respond to Him to carry His features and thoughts. The Evangelist Luke presented to us three examples of persons who asked to be His disciples. In our study of the gospel according to Matthew (8: 19), I included the comments of some fathers on the first two persons: the scribe who requested to follow Christ, yet with an untrue intention, to be answered By the Lord: "*"Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head"* (58). Namely, the Son of Man did not find a place in him…… The second person, even though he longed for discipleship with a good intention, yet was hindered by a familial duty, important in the eyes of men, namely caring for his father until he buries him……. To those two examples, the Evangelist Luke added a third person, who longed to be a disciple of the Lord, and to follow Him, yet not with a complete devotion, nor true maturity; asking to go first to bid farewell from those in his household …….The Lord responded to him by saying: "*No one having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God"* (62).

In those three examples, it is to be noticed:

a- Our heavenly Friend knows what goes on in the inner heart: The first and the third persons sought the discipleship, and their request was rejected, on account of that the first had a heart not pure in its depths and gols; and he third was not serious…… The second person, on the other hand, even though he did not seek by his lips, but the Lord, hearing his heart's request, called him to discipleship. Yet, when he asked the Lord the permission to go first to bury his father, He raised him above the temporal duties for the sake of the eternal work of preaching.

   The first and the third persons counted themselves zealous and fit for discipleship; and the second, in humility did not request it, but was called by the Lord. In other words, I wish we request the discipleship to God, not by our lips, but by the purity and inner flame of our hearts; for then, the Lord will call us, and will bandage the wounds of our weakness, to prepare us to testify to Him.

b- Commenting on the first person, St. Augustine says: [Intending to follow Christ, the Lord knew for sure that he (the first one) was seeking what is for his own sake, and not for that of Jesus Christ (Philippians 2: 21), saying: "*Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord' shall enter the kingdom of God"* (Matthew 7: 21). That man, therefore did not know himself, as the divine Physician knew him. If he ever perceived that he was full of hypocrisy and deception, he would know with whom he was talking. That is why the Lord said to him: "*Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head"* (58) namely that He had no place in your heart, where the foxes find holes for themselves.; and the birds of heaven find nests, being high and haughty. Because you are full of craftiness and pride, you are not fit to follow me; for how could the crafty follow the simple?].

   We may also say that that person, being bound to the love of the world, requested discipleship, not for the sake of the Lord Himself, but for the sake of an earthly honor or a temporary benefit; that is why the Lord revealed to him the nature of the Teacher; that the foxes living in the wilderness have hples to which they are bound, and in which they find comfort; So are the birds of heaven, they have nests to which they resort every now and then; but the Son of Man, is Heavenly, and has no comfort in the temporals; nor has on earth

a place to settle down …… Hence you are not fit for discipleship until you set yourself completely free from the earth, and let your soul sour up to heaven

Our Heavenly Friend, wishes for His disciples to carry the feature of heavenly thought, and of the exalted high up life.

c- Presenting to us an interpretation close to that of St. Augustine, concerning the first person, St. Ambrose says: [Despite his obedience and steadfast ministry, yet he did not find favor with the Lord; on account of that the Lord does not care for the outer appearances, but cares for the hidden purity of heart; hence, exhorting the mature to have the heart of children, He once said:

"***Whoever receives this little child in My name ……..”*** (48)

To teach us that simplicity should not be for a purpose; nor love be envious; but giving has to be willingly and not forced……. It is befitting of us to have the true simplicity, a nature acquired through strive; hence the Lord says: "*Whoever receives one of these little children in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me receives, not Me, but Him who sent Me”* (Mark 9: 37).

Yes indeed! Whoever receives him who likens Christ receives Christ; and who receives the image of God receives God; But, being unable to see the image of God, the Word Himself came to dwell in our midst through incarnation, to bring Godhead close to us, even though He is far above us.

“Foxes have holes”. The devil is deceptive like foxes, sets snares and lives with craftiness …… seeks a prey inside the dwelling place of man himself.

The Lord compares the heretics to foxes, hence He keeps them away from His crop, saying: "*Catch up the foxes, the little foxes that spoil the vine”* (Songs 2: 15).

And the birds of heaven often refer to the evil spirits that build their nests in the wicked hearts; where the Son of Man finds nowhere to lay His head.

Craftiness leaves no place for simplicity, nor for Divinities in those hearts ……. But, wherever the Lord sees the purity of heart, there, He would lay His great work; namely the great and exalted gift that flows in the hearts of the godly].

d- Commenting on the second person, he did not seek the discipleship with his lips, like the first one, but talked with the purity of his heart; he was ready for discipleship, yet for the sake of a familial commitment toward his father, requested postponement, St. Ambrose says: [Even though the faith of his heart proclaimed itself before the Lord; yet His emotion and familial commitment made him request postponement. But the Lord Christ, preparing men for the gospel, did not allow for any temporary physical emotion to come in the way.

Yes indeed, the divine law commanded the commitment to these duties; and the Lord Himself rebuked the Jews for breaking it (see Matthew 15: 4, 5); and the apostle Paul said in his epistle: " *the first commandment with a promise* is: '*Honor your father and mother'"* (Ephesians 6: 2). That young man, therefore longed to obey God's commandment, and to go and bury his father……. Yes indeed, the parents should be honored; but God should be obeyed first. We are committed to love those who gave birth to us; but not more than our love for Him who created us. It is as though He says to him: [I called you to My gospel; I need you to do something greater than that you yourself intend to do ……. Therefore,

"Let the dead bury their own dead" (60)].

If the fault of the first one, was that, in human enthusiasm he said: *I will follow You wherever You go",,* while his heart was bound to the world, that of the second, saying: "*Let me first go and bury my father",* has put his father ahead, when God should be put ahead.. According to St. Augustine: [Love should be put in its proper order; Give it to everyone as is befitting of him; do not put in the rear what should be put ahead; Love your parents, but love God more.

According to St. Ambrose: [How would man be kept from burying his own father, even though this is one of the godly works?!..... The Lord teaches us to put Him ahead, to be followed by man. Even though burying one's father is something commended, yet not befitting; lest the minister would divide his care, his love for preaching would become lukewarm, and his spiritual growth would be impaired. …….We should go first to preach, before we are hindered by any other commitment. …… Hence, when the Lord sent His disciple to preach, He commanded them not to greet anyone on their way; not that He does not care for love, but His care for the growth of ministry gives him more pleasure].

"Let the dead bury their own dead" (60)

St. Ambrose wonders: How could the dead bury their own dead? ……. [Here He refers to two kinds of death: the death of the body, and the death of sin; and there is even a third kind of death by which we come to death to sin, and live to God; the way the Lord Christ did when; "*the death that He died, He died for sin once for all, but the life that He lives, He lives to God"* (Romans 6: 10).

There is the kind of death that separates the spirit from the body, which we should not fear, on account of that it is the start of setting forth, ……..It is not a punishment, which the strong do not fear; the wise desires, and the miserable long for it, as is written: "*In those days, men will seek death, and will not find it"* (Revelation 9:6).

Another kind of death puts an end to the evil pleasures of this world, when the body does not die, but sin does. Such death we practice when we are buried together with Christ in the font of Baptism (Romans 6: 4; Colossians 2: 22); when we die to things of this world, and forget about our past life; a kind of death desired by Balaam, when he prophesied, saying: *"Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my end be like his"* (Numbers 23: 10).

The third kind of death is carried by Christ (by the cross) for our life, for we know that He is the eternal life (John 17: 3) . It is seen by the righteous now, as though a riddle, but they will ultimately see it face to face, for: "*The breath of our nostrils, the anointed of the Lord, was caught in their pits, of whom we said, 'Under his shadow, we shall live among the nations"* (Lamentations 4: 20); ……David says: "*In the shadow of Your wings, I shall make my refuge"* (Psalm 57: 1). ……..And the Church longed. "*to sit down in His shade with great delight"* (Songs 2: 3). If Your shadow, O Lord is with such a benefit, how would be Your truth?! "*For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, so also you will appear with Him in glory"* (Colossians 3: 3, 4). How amazing is this life that knows no death! …… God, therefore, does not forbid us to mourn and to bury our dead; but He puts the godly piety in the foremost level, to be followed by the familial commitments. …….. Let the spiritually dead bury their dead; but let the chosen ones follow Him].

e- Concerning the third man, he was not serious in his intention to follow the Lord; With a divided heart, he wished to follow Him, but at the same time he loved the world …. …… Such a man, can start, but will never fulfill; hence it is said:

"*No one having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God"* (62).

God wants to have the whole heart, to remain with Him, and never apostatize, lest it would become a pillar of salt like Lot's wife, who was saved by departing from Sodom together with her husband Lot and her two daughters, but she did not finish her way, but apostatized by her heart, and perished. Because of this, our Lord Christ says: "*Let him who is on the housetop not go down to take anything out of his house. And let him who is in the field, not go back to take his clothes"* (Matthew 24: 17, 18). Whoever was raised by the Lord up to the (housetop) to behold the heavenly secrets, should not come down where the temporal things are; and whoever set forth along the way of preaching, should not retreat from ministry.

Writing to 'Paula' to exhort her not to go far in her grief because of the death of 'Blaesill', St. Jerome says: [Surely, believing in Christ and bearing Him inside us; and because of the anointment we have received (1 John 2: 270, it is befitting of us not to depart from His temple – namely from our Christian work – and not to

become perplexed like the non-believing nations, but to perpetually remain inside, as servants obedient to the Lord]…….. As though, having dedicated her life to minister to God, he demands from her, not to let her mourning on anyone make her forsake her evangelic worshipping work, but consummate the way of her strife until the end.

According to St. John Cassian: [It would be very unfortunate that, when you should bear the basic and main principles , to set forth ahead toward perfection, you start to fall back to what is worse. It is not who starts, but "*He who endures to the end shall be saved"* (Matthew 24: 13). …… Exhorting us on the unceasing spiritual strife, without retreat, he says: [There is a hidden accusation in the book of Deuteronomy against those who claim that they have forsaken the world, while they fear of losing their earthly possessions; being written: "*What man is there who is fearful and faint-hearted? Let him go and return to his house, lest the heart of his brethren faint like his heart"* (Deuteronomy 20: 8). What is more clear than this testimony?!..... Is it not obvious that the Holy Book would rather have them not give that pledge in its early stages, nor bear its name, lest they become a bad role model that draws the others to divert away from the perfection of the Holy Book].

==========