

On Shepherding

By St Gregory the Great

Which people should stay away from pastoring?

Self knowledge is required before venturing into accepting the post of shepherding because existent and persistent vice will eventually judge such pastors. Therefore, he who has been defiled by sin should not intercede for the sins of others.

The voice of the almighty to Aaron through Moses said “*Speak to Aaron, saying: ‘No man of your descendants in succeeding generations, who has any defect, may approach to offer the bread of his God. For any man who has a defect shall not approach: a man blind or lame, who has a marred face or any limb too long, a man who has a broken foot or broken hand, or is a hunchback or a dwarf, or a man who has a defect in his eye, or eczema or scab, or is a eunuch. No man of the descendants of Aaron the priest, who has a defect, shall come near to offer the offerings made by fire to the Lord. He has a defect; he shall not come near to offer the bread of his God. He may eat the bread of his God, both the most holy and the holy; only he shall not go near the veil or approach the altar, because he has a defect, lest he profane My sanctuaries; for I the Lord sanctify them.’*” (Leviticus 21:17-23).

The Blind

A blind person is the one who has not experienced the light of heavenly meditation. For, he whom the darkness of this world has reached will not be able to discern the coming light because he will not know how to yearn for it. Thus, he will not know what initiative to take or which direction to go into. As Hanna the prophetess said, “*He will guard the feet of His saints, But the wicked shall be silent in darkness. For by strength no man shall prevail.*” (1 Samuel 2:9).

The Lame

A lame person is the one who truly knows the way but cannot steadfastly walk along that way because of his ill self and inability to rise above his bad habits to the level of virtue and strong will. In this respect St. Paul said, “*Therefore strengthen the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be dislocated, but rather be healed. Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord*” (Hebrews 12:12-14).

The Marred Face

A person with a marred face is someone who lacks the sense of smell that distinguishes good from bad odors. A marred face represents the lack of the virtue of discernment with which to differentiate between good and evil and thus make sound choices. The book of the Song of Songs described the Church, His bride saying *“Your neck is like an ivory tower, Your eyes like the pools in Heshbon By the gate of Bath Rabbim. Your nose is like the tower of Lebanon Which looks toward Damascus”* (Song of Solomon 7:4). Through the virtue of discernment, the holy Church understands the trials launched invariably against her; and from her tower knows beforehand, the evil wars about to take place.

The Too Long Nose

Some people, unaware of their shortsightedness, put too much trust in themselves asking too many unimportant inquisitive questions. This trait is explained in the verse *“any limb too long”* (Leviticus 21:18). It is obvious that a long protruding nose, though indicative of excessive discretion, yet spoils the beauty of that body part.

The Broken Foot or Broken Hand

A person with “a broken arm or leg” symbolizes someone who cannot walk in God’s way and is totally stripped off of good works. In that sense such a person differs from a lame one because the latter would try, even if it were with difficulty, to partake in doing good works.

The Hunchback

A person with a hunchback represents one who is bent under the weighty burden of the world with his eyes looking downward fixed on the basest things below. Even when he hears good news about the dwelling of the heavenly Father; yet he, under his evil habits, would not be able to look upward or ascend with his heart or thoughts which have tied him up and pulled him down to the earth. David represents such a person saying *“I am troubled, I am bowed down greatly; I go mourning all the day long”* (Psalm 38:6). Our Lord describes such people *“Now the ones that fell among thorns are those who, when they have heard, go out and are choked with cares, riches, and pleasures of life, and bring no fruit to maturity”* (Luke 8:14).

The Defective Eye

Literally, though a defective eye might have a healthy eye ball, yet its lids are bound to weaken and become inflated because of secretions and tears. Likewise, though a man with a defect in his spiritual eyes, through his natural insight, might glow with the knowledge of the truth, yet his eyes have been dimmed by carnal acts. Some people’s insight weakens because of their earthly life. Their once discerning power becomes dimmed because of perpetual sinning. The angel’s recommendation for such people is *“I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see”* (Revelation 3:18). The eyes of our understanding become strong when we anoint them with the salve of good works that enables them to see the brightness of the true light.

The White Sheathed Eye

A person with a sheath on his eye symbolizes someone deprived from beholding the true light because of blindness caused by pseudo wisdom and false righteousness. The pupil of the eye can see only if it is black. Any white sheath on it will hinder sight. Likewise, when a person comes to realize his wicked sinful nature, then he becomes mentally empowered to see the inner light that is in him. On the other hand, if he convinces himself of his own prudence and righteousness, then he is bound to block the unfathomable light of the true knowledge. The same applies to the arrogant person whom St. Paul describes as *“Professing to be wise, they became fools”* (Romans 1:22).

The Skin Diseased Person

Internal high body temperature results in external skin rashes. This condition symbolizes the fights of the flesh exemplified in fornication. When the desires of the heart get realized corporeally, the power of those desires control and overcome the person. For St. Paul, controlling and purifying such desires is as serious as treating skin conditions. As humans we are bound to be attacked with impure thoughts. But if we do not take victory over the fight with Satan, such thoughts would anchor and reside in our minds *“No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it”* (1 Corinthians 10:13).

A Person with Scabies

Scabies is an infestation that settles in the outer layer of the human skin caused by tiny mites without causing any pain but gradually marring the beauty of the infected organs; and if not controlled it multiplies abundantly and rampantly. Symbolically, this is the case with greed. People who are not satisfied with what they have always aspiring for short-lived pleasures, not realizing the spiritual damage existing therein, are bound to be defiled by the snares of covetousness, captivated in envy, hatred and marred by the false promises incurred by sin. *“For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows”* (1 Timothy 6:10).

The Eunuch

A castrated person, though not committing a sexual act, might be laden excessively under the burden of perpetual impure thoughts. Though the body is not defiled by the act itself, yet the heart is enticed by the frivolous thoughts of fornication without feeling the pangs of the conscience. Testicular torsion is a disease caused by the flow of an internal fluid in the testicles causing enlargement and discomfort. A person with testicular torsion symbolizes people who have allowed their thoughts to roam about in the things that move desire thus burdening their hearts with a heavy load, resulting in becoming unable to disentangle themselves from such thoughts to rise above their poor ignoble hidden acts.

Whoever is ridden with any of the faults mentioned above should abstain from offering the bread of the Lord because no one can atone for the sins of others if his personal shortcomings prevail over him.

Articles on the Christian History - The Fourth Century

The Twelfth Article

Five months following his return to Alexandria having attended the Council of Nicea, Pope Alexander became sick and reposed in the Lord after a long struggle with the Arians throughout the fifteen years of his papacy (311- 326 AD) during the reign of the emperors Licinius and Constantine the Great.

An episode related by Father Menassa Youhanna in his book “The History of the Coptic Church” tells of what Pope Alexander had done at the beginning of his papacy. There used to be a pagan feast celebrated lavishly for the idol Mars on the 12th of the annual month of Hathor. The pope managed to turn this day into a feast for Archangel Michael. Building a church and consecrating it on the same day of the idol’s feast, the pope made this day of the Coptic month of Hathor a perpetual feast for the Archangel Michael.

Pope Athanasius, the Apostolic, the 20th Pope

One day as Pope Alexander was taking a walk along the beach in Alexandria, he saw a group of kids playing church and imitating the priest and deacon in performing the rites of the Mystery of Baptism. The one playing the role of priest very precisely was Athanasius. Pope Alexander added Athanasius to the patriarchate and took care of him teaching him the church rites besides the Greek language, philosophy and logic. Then he appointed him head of the deacons.

Athanasius became a disciple of St. Anthony the Great, remaining with him for a period and was to write his biography that eventually became for many people a source of enlightenment and attraction to monasticism.

In that quietude, St Athanasius wrote his two books, “Against the Arians” and “On the Incarnation of the Logos”. As Arianism started to spread throughout Alexandria and the surrounding countries, Pope Alexander convened in Alexandria a council for all the bishops. Athanasius, the deacon was among the participants and was also present at the Council of Nicea called for by the Emperor Constantine himself and attended by all the bishops around the world. In that Council, Athanasius contributed remarkably in the constitution of 'The Creed of Faith'.

On his death bed, Pope Alexander recommended that Athanasius be ordained over the See of Alexandria. Athanasius escaped to the desert; but was found and brought back to be ordained pope on July 8, 326 AD as the 20th pope around the age of thirty years. All the bishops in Egypt

gathered to lay the hands on him out of love and support for him in his fight against the Arians who in vain tried hard to stop his ordination because of fear of the strength of his personality and richness and depth of knowledge.

Athanasius the Pope

History has not recorded anyone else having suffered as much as Pope Athanasius. That is why he has been titled 'the Apostolic' having come close to the disciples and apostles in their sufferings and hardships. He was also named "Athanasius Contra Mundum", meaning against the world in concordance with his reply "I am against the world" when once told that the whole world was against him. For, without Athanasius the whole world would have turned to Arianism. In order to preserve the faith for the coming generations, God had protected Athanasius throughout his papacy which lasted over forty-five years

At the onset of his papacy, the church lived in short-lived temporary peace during which Pope Athanasius accomplished two profound missions:

The first: he sent one of his disciples, Frumentius, the well anchored in his faith, to evangelize in the upper River Nile and Ethiopia. His evangelism was very successful and he was ordained as the 1st bishop of Ethiopia.

The second: Pope Athanasius paid pastoral visitation throughout Egypt to get to know his people in person. During one of these visitations, he saw a vision in which the Lord told him "I have raised you a pillar and light for my church. You will encounter a lot of hardships, and many false accusations will be tossed on you because of your fight for me. But by the almighty power you will be victorious and the truth of the Gospel will be preached in the churches."

Stronger tempests and darker clouds

The Arians saw in the death of Pope Alexander a chance of controlling the See of Alexandria. So, they sought to attack the newly ordained Pope Athanasius. It happened that at her death bed, Emperor Constantine's eldest sister exhorted her brother to take care of her close friend the Arian priest. Out of his compassionate heart and love for the poor, Constantine did so. As a result, the priest managed to inculcate in the emperor's heart the urge to bring Arius back from exile under the false disguise that Arius's faith was the correct one. In a meeting with the emperor, Arius presented to him a fabricated forged faith doctrine written and signed by him. Unfortunately, Constantine accepted that doctrine and commanded the return of Arius and all the exiled Arian bishops.

With a recommendation letter from the Emperor and a copy of that false faith doctrine, those exiled bishops presented a plea to return to the church. However, Pope Athanasius' disappointing reaction destroyed their dream. His decision was translated in a letter to the emperor saying "It is impossible to accept back those heretic bishops who have been excommunicated by the Council of Nicaea. The church does not accept in her communal life those who have rejected the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ."