



**Coptic Orthodox Diocese of
the Southern United States**

**The Monthly Message
to the Fathers, the Priests**

June 2022

Teachings within the Church (3)

Introduction

The church teachings are meant to be presented crystal clear, unblemished and unbiased by any personal trends or inclinations. Any time these teachings are presented otherwise because of individual trends, then these trends become perilous especially when they are propagated under the directions of the clergymen who express their own principles and opinions that become manifested in their adamant adoption and support of such trends.

With the grace of God, in this month's article, we will give examples of, and solutions to some of the various fashions that might become hazardous to the genre of the church teachings.

1. The Tool of the Announcements

The time allocated to delivering announcements by a priest to the congregation is vital and legal. However, the content of the announcements is the subject of discussion. Making behavioral management the subject matter of the weekly church announcement is not only futile and boring; but it also reveals loss of the main goal, the goal of the spiritual growth of the congregation. People get tired of being constantly chastised and admonished for certain so-called bad behavior. The allegedly reference point for such a trend could be Jesus Christ's approach in cleaning and purifying the temple. However, we should not forget that admonishing and scolding were not the only single approach the Lord Jesus Christ had used to change behavior. In addition, Jesus Christ's behavior then and there had a prophetic meaning behind it which is not the time nor place to elaborate on. More often than not Jesus Christ showed His absolute love, care and forgiveness while correcting behavior.

Another misquoted and wrongly referenced Bible verse is St Paul's words, "*For God is not the author of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints*" (1 Corinthians 14:33).

St. Paul was referring to spiritual matters that he mentioned in the verse above. "*How is it then, brethren? Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an*

interpretation. Let all things be done for edification. If anyone speaks in a tongue, let there be two or at the most three, each in turn, and let one interpret. But if there is no interpreter, let him keep silent in church, and let him speak to himself and to God. Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others judge. But if anything is revealed to another who sits by, let the first keep silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, that all may learn and all may be encouraged. And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets. For God is not the author of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints" (1 Corinthians 14:26-33).

Unfortunately, priests have forgotten that their main job is not just to establish order in the church, which of course is important, but their main job is to deliver God's commandments.

"For the lips of a priest should keep knowledge, and people should seek the law from his mouth; for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts. But you have departed from the way; you have caused many to stumble at the law. You have corrupted the covenant of Levi,' says the Lord of hosts" (Malachi 2:7-8).

As St. Peter has said, *"If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God. If anyone ministers, let him do it as with the ability which God supplies, that in all things God*

may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belong the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen" (1 Peter 4:11).

The Word of God should stand above all words; and His commandments announced before any other announcement. No wonder the Praxis readings are concluded with what is written in the Holy Book of Acts, *"So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed"* (Acts 19:20).

God's words are more effectively powerful in bringing about change in people's behavior than repeated punitive words.

2. The Tool of Control

A priest might get deceived by false feelings of fatherhood. Such pseudo feelings can be an undercover for the desire to control. It is true that teaching about the importance of the mystery of confession, discipleship and spiritual growth are among the primary duties in priesthood. However, a priest must be careful not to use these disciplinary areas as tools to satisfy his own desire to control people or implement his personal motives of success seeing his church members growing in number and emotionally attached to him. The mystery of confession is for the forgiveness of sins and renewal of hope in God's mercy and not an arena for a priest's

personal control over a confessor's life through interference in the very personal choices or preferences. It is important to allow the Holy Spirit to teach and guide because teaching and guiding are the very reasons for which the Holy Spirit has been sent. *"...The Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord"* (Isaiah 11:2). As our Lord Himself has promised.

"And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever— the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you" (John 14:16-18).

"I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you. All things that the Father has are Mine. Therefore, I said that He will take of Mine and declare it to you" (John 16:12-15).

St. Paul stressed the role of spiritual directors as speakers of the word of God and not presenters of their own agendas.

"Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Do not be carried about with various and strange doctrines. For it is good that the heart be established by grace, not with foods which have not profited those who have been occupied with them" (Hebrews 13:7-9).

Therefore, congregants should have the freedom of choice as long as the choice does not contradict the early father's teachings or the rites and rituals of the church. Hence, a priest should not get upset or annoyed if one of his confessors proceeded to think of choosing his or her spouse; or joined a prayer group or a Bible study group prior to consulting him or asking his opinion or permission. A priest should be able to examine his reasons behind his complaints whether they are for the benefit of the individuals, the church unity and the authenticity of the teachings or just manifestations of personal desires to control and domineer. The difference is certainly very big. An example of healthy reasoning void of personal gain and hidden agendas is Moses'

reaction to Joshua concerning the two persons who had been granted the Spirit of prophecy.

"But two men had remained in the camp: the name of one was Eldad, and the name of the other Medad. And the Spirit rested upon them. Now they were among those listed, but who had not gone out to the tabernacle; yet they prophesied in the camp. And a young man ran and told Moses, and said, 'Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.' So Joshua the son of Nun, Moses' assistant, one of his choice men, answered and said, 'Moses my lord, forbid them!' Then Moses said to him, 'Are you [a]zealous for my sake? Oh, that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put His Spirit upon them!' And Moses returned to the camp, he and the elders of Israel" (Numbers 11:26-30).

3. The Tool of Change

Positive change for the better, the healthier, for the advancement, growth and development of individuals in particular and society in general is always good and welcomed. However uncontrolled, unmonitored and unjustified change just for the sake of bringing about change could be counter effective and sometimes detrimental. It is good for a priest to be open minded, knowledgeable of the many changes in demography, economy, politics, etc., that take place in the world in

general and in his church society in particular. However, these changes are not a green light to allow the church leaders to implant in the young generations' hearts the frantic desire to bring about the so-called overall drastic change. The cause of this feverish desire to alter thoughts and practices is brought about by the internet wherein people find access to various theories, studies and proposals that hold within their folds all encouragement and support to alter the practices to which the church has adhered and practiced for centuries. Sadly enough, some priests after having read different opinions, that discredit the credibility of some church practices, feel assured that to them has been given the beacon of change. Two points need to be clarified regarding the place whereat to talk about changes and the validity of such changes:

- **The Place of Deliverance**

The church pulpit is not the place for boasting or showing off about discoveries wrought by and through the internet. Studies and the implications and ramifications therein should not be utilized as benchmarks for proving the so-called errors in the church rituals. We have to understand that the church rites and rituals, like many other facets of life and civilization had to undergo evolution. Therefore, there is no need to create confusion and doubt in the minds of our young generations the only

fruit of which would be self-satisfaction and egoistic glamour on the side of the speaker.

- **The Validity of Deliverance**

All that has been discovered and hence considered eccentric and alien to the church rites have been introduced for a purpose. For example the Holy Great Friday prayers concerning the faithfulness of the thief on the right side of the Lord Jesus Christ, is not in reality part of the rites of the Holy Paschal prayers. However, those words "Remember me O Lord when You come into Your Kingdom" (Holy Paschal Prayers, Friday 6th Hour) are cherished and very fervently prayed and repeated by the congregation. Therefore, beware not to discuss and propagate such matters openly under the false banner of your pseudo knowledge. Such matters need to be discussed with those who are in higher positions and ranks in the church and in the spirit of humility. In the end, the church leaders know when and how to insert alterations without causing strife or disharmony in the united body of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

After having mentioned some perilous trends that seem to creep inside the churches and find their places in the teachings over which the priests preside and claim authority, there remains the question, are there exemplary

ways in delivering thoughts and information? The answer is YES!

Christ's Way, the Only Way; "*...I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me*" (John 14:6).

St. Paul summarized it clearly saying, "*just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved. In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace which He made to abound toward us in all wisdom and prudence, having made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself*" (Ephesians 1:4-9).

Jesus Christ is legitimately the only way because He taught about repentance, the kingdom, salvation to everyone, and His unlimited, unconditional love offered to everyone especially sinners. Jesus Christ never interfered nor intervened in people's private life nor bothered about the nitty-gritty details of people's lives nor the fashion of dresses

Jesus Christ did not go about chastising people for the least and biggest faults. On the contrary, it is said about Him, *"how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him. And we are witnesses of all things which He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem, whom [a]they killed by hanging on a tree "* (Acts 10:38-39).

He said about Himself, *"The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly"* (John 10:10).

The best example is the way He treated the Samaritan woman who had become the first evangelist who has been empowered to convert an entire city.

The holy apostles followed the footsteps of their Master, establishing order within the church, not just for the sake of keeping intact a specific institutional structure but for the sake of keeping Jesus Christ's body united.

The holy apostles taught social and spiritual manners, modesty of words and attires, forgiveness and forbearance as fruits of the internal work of the Holy Spirit and not through dictates of how to dress or what to dress, what make-up to use or what pair of shoes.

May the Lord grant us the Spirit of wisdom and discernment that we may remain faithful to the Master in administering the talent of teaching with which He has entrusted us; delivering it at the right time with the right sound mind void of personal gain or hidden egoistic agenda.

"And the Lord said, 'Who then is that faithful and wise steward, whom his master will make ruler over his household, to give them their portion of food in due season? 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 is not looking for him, and at an hour when he is not aware, and will cut him in two and appoint him his portion with the unbelievers. 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 ask the more.'" (Luke 12:42-48).