



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

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

**December 2023**  
**The Pastoral Services (5)**  
**Education**

*"Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine" (1 Timothy 4:13).*

It is noticeable how St. Paul's candidly comprehensive message to St. Timothy implicitly carries a powerful message to all those in leadership and service positions summing up the essential requirements in service; because pastoral services are not just concerned with fulfilling people's needs and solving their problems; but they extend to include education in the heart of pastoral care. The Holy Bible speaks about the destructive danger of the "lack of knowledge" that leads to perdition.

*"My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being priest for Me; because you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children" (Hosea 4:6).*

The second half of this verse (Hosea 4:6) confirms that the priest who rejects knowledge is also refused before God.

Therefore, to educate and be educated is a priest's primary duty towards himself and his congregation. Hence, a number of foundational principles will be established in this respect.

**Knowledge & Reading**

There is a strong evident correlation between reading and the subsequent resultant knowledge. Therefore, for a priest to widen his knowledge, he must devote quality time to reading especially the Holy Bible essentially the breath of God.

**Perpetual Reading**

It cannot be stressed enough, the importance of perpetual and careful reading of the Holy Bible in great depth striving to memorize the holy words and repeatedly using them in our sermons as well as in conversations instead of using scientific terms that might delude us into thinking that they are more attractive and more resounding. Studying and understanding the word of God is of paramount importance, literally living it, inscribing it in the heart and mind until a priest acquires the "mind of Christ". Jeremiah, the prophet, expressed his experience with the word of God saying, *"Your words were found, and I ate them, and Your word was to me the joy and rejoicing of my heart; for I am called by Your name, O Lord God of hosts"* (Jeremiah 15:16). According to the fathers, God's word is purposed to be not just merely read, but to be "eaten", because the process of eating entails unity with the digested elements producing nourishment and growth. That is exactly what the word of God does with our souls bringing

about spiritual growth and stability of wisdom and discernment.

### **Reading, Exhorting & Teaching**

Some people differentiate between exhortation and doctrine defining exhortation as discipline to the soul for the sake of bringing about conviction, chastisement, and repentance in order to attain purification and growth in virtues. On the other hand, teaching is confined to teaching the Christian faith, and the doctrine of salvation. In reality, it is difficult to separate the two as we see St. Timothy being instructed and encouraged to practice both connectedly.

### **Reading: A Lived Message**

Hence, a priest is responsible for relaying St. Paul's message first and foremost to himself so that when he stands at the pulpit, he opens his mouth with teaching words that fill the listeners' hearts with God's ways, fortifying their faith against any deviation or drifting away. A priest can reach this goal only through embarking upon reading the Holy Scripture and the books of the holy fathers which will charge him with enormous wisdom and knowledge.

What has been said about Apollos, Aquilla and Priscilla concerning their knowledge of the word of God is striking.

*"Now a certain Jew named Apollos, born at Alexandria, an eloquent man and mighty in the Scriptures, came to Ephesus. This man had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the*

*things of the Lord, though he knew only the baptism of John. So he began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Aquila and Priscilla heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately"* (Acts 18:24-26).

Although Apollos had been described as *"an eloquent man and mighty in the Scriptures,"* yet he was in need of knowing more and knowing precisely. This proves that we too constantly need to know more and know more precisely because God's commandments have no limited end, *"I have seen the consummation of all perfection, but Your commandment is exceedingly broad"* (Psalm 119:96).

### **Teaching in the Church**

The teaching in the church has to be very exact, having the building and edification of people as the main goal and purpose. Hence, a priest must not believe in and rely so much on his personal meditations on the church rites and turn them into doctrines.

Unfortunately, the meaning and purpose of a lot of ritual issues are not known to us. So, many fathers tried hard to provide explanations through reflections and meditations, which is appreciated, but they should not present their views as if inspired by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, such endeavors must not by any means replace the Holy Scripture. In our modern times, after the discovery of transcripts, a lot of those rituals have been revised and corrected throughout the years. Consequently, close scrutiny must be applied when carrying out teaching despite different opinions. Having various points

of views do not tarnish neither the church nor the teachings but constitute an incentive to continue reading and researching.

### **Teaching for Edifying**

Just as St. Paul has said, "*Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers*" (Ephesians 4:29). Therefore, every word that comes out of a priest's mouth must be for building and edifying the hearers. A priest must be cautious not to make his sermons and teachings tools for self-glorification and adoration making himself sound as if he knows the hidden things. Doing so will only incur regression and destruction. This applies to all other areas of service such as visitations, private discussions, etc. A priest's concern should flow in one direction which is teaching his people God's ways and words away from futile theories and hypothesis.

This takes us back to the starting point which is the importance of getting enriched with the knowledge of God's word. "*So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.*" (Acts 20:32).

St. Paul feels safely contented leaving his people and service not under his own teachings, words, principles, style, but under the economy of God's word, that is capable of granting edification and inheritance.

### **The Joyful Outcome**

Once a priest implements his teachings based on Holy Scripture, his people will become disciples and teachers at the same time; having been filled with the spirit of discipleship to God and to His teachings and spiritual fatherhood. In addition, his love for knowledge makes them want to imitate him following his spirit and curriculum. For, mitigated teachings produce followers only.

St. Paul is the best example; because he had spent a big part of his life learning from the Pharisees. The result was that he became an extensively blind persecutor of the Christians. However, when God's light had shined on him, he turned into a disciple and teacher knowing how to guide people to listen only to Jesus Christ's teachings which lead to his salvation and liberty.

*"till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ—" (Ephesians 4:13-15).*

The Lord is capable of filling us with all spiritual knowledge, wisdom and understanding necessary to make us faithful enough to conduct the teaching and edifying services within His holy church so that our people and we may be taught by God. "*It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Therefore, everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to Me*" (John 6:45).