



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of  
the Southern United States

The Monthly Message  
to the Fathers, the Priests

**April 2024**

## **Diseases in Spiritual Leadership**

### **Change of Heart & Emotions (2)**

This month's article deals with another spiritual ailment, mainly change of heart and emotions that inflict spiritual leaders. The Holy Book of Proverbs teaches us to "*Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life*" (Proverbs 4:23).

As a shepherd, teacher and leader, a priest must diligently be concerned about guarding his heart whole and perfect before God. By heart we mean his seat of emotions, sensitivity towards service and those served. Guarding the heart also includes ensuring steadfastness against emotional changes. Here are some means to "*Keep your heart...*" (Proverbs 4:23).

#### **1. "*Keep your heart*" Compassionate & Sensitive**

While serving as a layman, a servant might be quite compassionate towards those whom he serves, quite close

to them and sympathetic with them. However, after his ordination as a priest, other concerns start to compete with empathy and gradually organizational processes as well as rites and liturgical concerns in the church start to replace his compassionate feelings towards his people. Thus, his heart gets preoccupied with the managerial structure of service which sometimes might conflict with serving people spiritually; a thing that is above all structural rules and laws. Thus a priest might fall a victim of the dilemma whether to comply to his vision regarding policy making or serving his people's spiritual needs even if this latter necessitated some concessions and modifications of some regulatory rules. Here, a question poses itself as to whether there is discrepancy between spiritual and bureaucratic services. Of course the answer is NO! The issue resides with a priest's principles and preferences of putting one service over the other; "*Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that sanctifies the gold?*" (Matthew 23:17). Which is of more priority and importance: the system or the individual for whom the system is initiated?

While a priest diligently follows the regulatory rules for the sake of his people's privilege and salvation, yet in his heart he is ready to leave the "ninety-nine" (i.e. metaphorically speaking the organizational routine) for the sake of finding the lost sheep; because he knows what

pleases heaven. *"I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance"* (Luke 15:7).

Our advice is to read the Lord Jesus Christ's healing miracles to the woman with the bleeding issue, the woman with the feeble spirit, the man with the withered hand. These miracles and others reveal the Lord's compromise and stepping over some legal procedures for the sake of bringing healing to someone in need of healing. Our Lord Jesus Christ did not allow any of those legal precepts to stand between him and His love and compassion for those who were eagerly waiting for His healing and restoring touch. Thus, their repentance and return were much more important and precious than the legal system of "do not touch...do not taste..."

## **2. "Keep your heart" Against Lustful Desires**

It behooves us to remember that a priest is not a walking god on earth; but rather like any other human being he is surrounded with human weaknesses and presents an offering for his sins as well as for those of his people. Therefore, if he does not guard his heart against the lusts of this world, he will be in danger of sliding into abysses of very complicated dimensions.

As a human being, a priest gets tempted with the same exact worldly temptations just as his people. Therefore, while instructing his congregation, he must exercise self-vigilance, *"For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world"* (1 John 2:16); remembering that the priesthood garb is not an armor of war and defense in itself; knowing that sin *"...has cast down many wounded, and all who were slain by her were strong men"* (Proverbs 7:26).

Once a priest falls into slumber regarding protecting his heart and emotions, sooner than later he will find himself in a place different from where he has started; thus facing St. Paul's reprimanding words, *"Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh? Have you suffered so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain?"* (Galatians 3:3-4).

The grievous problem is when it becomes difficult to catch and uproot from the heart certain lustful desires that might continue with a priest throughout his serving life coloring his thoughts and spoiling his decisions; thus becoming *"...the foxes, the little foxes that spoil the vines, for our vines have tender grapes"* (Song of Solomon 2:15).

Throughout his serving years, a priest gets exposed to such types of temptations that know no age limit, service period, or any other factors. In the story of Susanna, those whose hearts were kindled with lust towards her were two elderly men. As mentioned earlier the danger resides not in the transience of the sin of lust, but in its permanent residence in the heart. As a result, emotions change and so it becomes difficult for an individual to untangle his thoughts and return in repentance.

### **3. "Keep your heart" Against Haughtiness & Self-preference**

*"Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going to God, 4 rose from supper and laid aside His garments, took a towel and girded Himself. After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded... So when He had washed their feet, taken His garments, and sat down again, He said to them, 'Do you know what I have done to you? You call Me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you. Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater*

*than he who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.'"* (John 13:3-5; 12-17).

More often than not a priest starts out his service with words of contrition, submission and dedication. However, gradually changes may start to take place in the heart, emotions and perspectives; and instead of visioning himself as Jesus Christ the servant, he believes himself *as* someone who *"...the government will be upon His shoulder..."* (Isaiah 9:6). The greatest catastrophe takes place when a priest's heart gets altered as a result of the too much honor, admiration and alleviation given by his people. Subsequently, he no more sees himself except as a lord and chief. Thus, the priesthood honor and grace turn into a dishonor and curse because of not having been able to understand it, handle it or handle with it. Such a priest misunderstands the honor and due respect given to his priesthood turning every submission offered to his person as an entitlement for being infallible, better than all, preferred over all. By time, if this type of feelings grows, his heart disposition changes from being *"... last of all and servant of all..."* (Mark 9: 35); to *"If I then, your Lord and Teacher..."* (John 13:14); thus inadvertently forgetting the rest of the commandment *"...have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet"* (John 13:14).

Heart and emotional changes brought about by authority and fame are more common and subsequently more harmful than any other causes; because a priest may exercise strict

vigilance against *"the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life"* (1 John 2:16). However, the ego is deceitful and can capture the heart imprisoning it in pseudo self-appreciation while depreciating the others. We have an example in the story of Ben-Hadad, King of Syria, *"Then Elisha went to Damascus, and Ben-Hadad king of Syria was sick; and it was told him, saying, 'The man of God has come here.' And the king said to Hazael, 'Take a present in your hand, and go to meet the man of God, and inquire of the Lord by him, saying, 'Shall I recover from this disease?'" So, Hazael went to meet him and took a present with him, of every good thing of Damascus, forty camel-loads; and he came and stood before him, and said, 'Your son Ben-Hadad king of Syria has sent me to you, saying, 'Shall I recover from this disease?'" And Elisha said to him, 'Go, say to him, 'You shall certainly recover.' However the Lord has shown me that he will really die.' Then he set his countenance in a stare until he was ashamed; and the man of God wept. And Hazael said, 'Why is my lord weeping?'..."* (2 Kings 8:7-12).

Shortly after, we see how Hazael and his son fought the Israelites. Contrary to his promises earlier calling himself "a dog", as soon as he became king, he changed his attitude. *"And Hazael king of Syria oppressed Israel all the days of Jehoahaz. But the Lord was gracious to them, had compassion on them, and regarded them, because of His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and would not yet destroy them or cast them from His presence"* (2 Kings

13:22-23). Hence, emotional changes took place right after having received royal authority; substituting haughtiness and pride in the place of meekness and humbleness first exhibited.

In conclusion, a priest must exercise caution in protecting his hearts and feelings; because it is possible for that humble and meek heart to acquire emotions that might change him over time due to unfolding incidents. Saul the King provides us with a perfect example of someone who had received a consecrated heart from God, *"So it was, when he had turned his back to go from Samuel, that God gave him another heart; and all those signs came to pass that day. When they came there to the hill, there was a group of prophets to meet him; then the Spirit of God came upon him, and he prophesied among them"* (1 Samuel 10:9-10). Unfortunately, Saul was the same person who having not guarded his heart, he turned into a proud, hard hearted person eventually rejected by God.

Let us always remember Solomon's advice, *"Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life"* (Proverbs 4:23); guarding our hearts, not periodically, but perpetually in righteousness, humbleness, compassion, and love. Let us guard our hearts vigilantly lest the enemy stealthily and unnoticeably comes to plant tiers. Let us pray with David, *"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me"* (Psalm 51:10).