



## Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States Monthly Message for the Monastic

April 2022

### On Prostrations

An elder was once said prostrations are the worship of God. We worship God, something that our enemy, the devil, does not do. He does not bow his head, he does not kneel, he does not worship. Everyone who worships God is an enemy of the devil, and hence a person of God. This is why prostrations have a great significance. If we do extra prostrations, this is an ascetical effort and will be rewarded by God. The few prostrations we do are slowly deposited in heaven above, and when we make our way upward, we will discover did they have become a large sum. This will help us when we give an account during the frightful moment we are judged.

The Coptic Church, in its humble and meek spirit, teaches her children three types of prostration, or metanias (bowing). These are: prostrations of worship, repentance, and honor.<sup>1</sup>

**1. Prostrations of Worship**, these are the prostrations offered to God during our individual or public worship, such as at the beginning of each of the hourly prayers when we say, “Lord have mercy....” St. Isaac said about such prostrations, “Bow at the beginning of your worship, asking God from your heart, with humiliation, to give you patience and control over your thoughts during prayers.” St. John Cassian said about the monks in Egypt, “I saw them in prayer. When they have finished reciting the Psalm, they do not prostrate themselves in a hurry, as if it is a duty they want to get out of the way, like many of us do. On the contrary, they stand for a while to raise a short prayer, then they prostrate themselves in awe and great devotion. After that, they get to their feet in a brisk manner, standing uprightly with all their thoughts absorbed in prayer.” The Church’s Canon defines the number and arrangement of such prostrations by saying, “the worshipper starts his prayer either with one or three prostrations. He should kneel down after each psalm or praise, or whenever the words “kneeling down” are contained in the prayer.” Believers (and in particular monks) who prostrate themselves as a daily routine during prayer follow these regulations. The aim of prostration is to offer thanks to the Lord for His great mercies, or for His help in a certain matter. These are known as thanksgiving prostrations. Another aim of prostrating in prayer is to implore the Lord to grant us certain virtues or to pray for other people, saying such things as,

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<sup>1</sup> Spirituality of the Rites of the Holy Liturgy

+ “Grant me, O Lord, the life of purity”, “Grant me, O Lord, the life of patience and tolerance”, “Grant me, O Lord, the life of complete love”, or focusing on any of the other virtues. Also, a person may devote a number of prostrations on behalf of those who have asked him to pray for them. He may be motivated to offer worships for them without their knowledge through his love for them and his awareness of their needs. One may also devote some prostrations to the Lord for the Church and its fathers, or for the safety of the world and its leaders, and so on.

On the topic of prostration in prayer, Mar Isaac said the following:

+ “Do not think that prostrating yourself before God is a light matter. None of all the good deeds equals persevering in completing prayers with prostrations.”

+ “Compel yourself to kneel down before God, for this invigorates the spirit of prayer.”

+ “Persistence in offering bows every now and then, will give the vigilant worshipper the ideal atmosphere for worshipping.”

+ “A love for continual prostration before God during prayer is an indication that the soul has died to the world and has realized the mystery of the new life.”

## **2. Prostrations of Repentance**

There are two types of these prostrations:

+ Offering metanias to God, asking Him to have mercy on us, to give us the life of repentance and to forgive us our sins. As we are doing these prostrations, we are remembering falling down because of sins but again rising up by the power of God and the cross.

+ Offered by a person to his brethren after a meeting of discussion or reconciliation. The other party should accept these metanias and offer a similar metania in return, as it is written in the Bible, *“Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times a day and seven times a day returns to you, saying, ‘I repent,’ you shall forgive him”* (Luke 17:3-4). The word “metanoia” is a Greek word which means repentance, that is, to change the mind from that which is wrong to that which is right. St. Paul says, *“And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God”* (Romans 12:2). Prostrations offered from the heart are a powerful action in attempting to attain the forgiveness of those whom you have transgressed against. If sincere, they can wipe out all effects of insult or transgression and refill the heart with a love greater than it felt before.

In “The Paradise of the Fathers” a famous spiritual book on the life and sayings of the desert fathers, there is a story about two brothers who were devout monks living in the wilderness of Sheheet. The devil became keen to drive a wedge between these two brothers. One day the younger brother lit a lamp and put it on its stand, but through Satan’s trickery, the lamp fell down and was extinguished. The older monk became very upset and hit his brother. At this, the younger brother bowed down and

said, "Do not get upset my brother. Just be patient and I will light the lamp again", repeating himself many times. When God saw how meek the younger brother was He tortured that devil until morning. The devil then went to the leader of demons, and told him what had happened. A priest of the idols who served the demons heard this story, and upon hearing it, left everything, believed, and joined the order of the monastic life. Right from the start of his monasticism, he practiced humility. He used to say, "Humility can overcome, dissolve and suppress all the power of the enemy."

He once said: "I once heard demons say to each other, 'Every time we are found between monks, we see them offering metanias to each other, suppressing our powers.'" Prostrations and repentance are signs of humility, a fear of God, and the following of the commandments by the worshipper. Such virtues cannot be tolerated by the devil, as it burns him.

### **3. Prostrations of Honor**

There are two kinds of these prostrations: Metanias offered to the martyrs and saints, and those offered to the fathers of the church.

**A.** Metanias offered before the relics of the martyrs and saints to honor their relics because they endured devotion, hunger, thirst, tears and sweat on account of their great love for our Lord, Jesus Christ. Through this they became a dwelling place for the Holy Spirit. We honor them according to the promise of our Lord, Who said, "For those who honor Me, I will honor, and those who despise Me, shall be lightly esteemed" (1Sam.2:30).

With such prostrations we also honor God, Who worked in them and led them to the shores of eternal peace. Through honoring the saints, we also ask for their prayers and intercessions, as they reflect the Light of Christ. As the saints are a mirror image of the Light of Christ, this Light is then transmitted to us. power and blessing, working in favor of our salvation and spiritual well-being. In heaven the saints fulfill the Lord's Will by caring and supplicating for us. Here on earth, we too fulfill God's will by honoring their commemorations and glorifying their relics and icons. We also ask them to cover us with their love and prayers of intercession. There are no barriers between heaven and earth, but instead, a strong communication between us and the saints, based on supplication and prayers.

His Grace Bishop Gregorious, Bishop of Higher Studies and Research, was asked, "Would your Grace shed some light on the church's teachings regarding honoring the saints' relics?", to which he answered, "The relics of the saints have engravings on them, telling their life stories; of their struggle and their virtues. Didn't the Apostle Paul say, 'I bear on my body the marks of Lord Jesus'? (Gal.6:17) Every strain that was felt by St. Paul left a mark on his body. For this reason, we honor the relics of the saints. We realize and we believe that those relics were the dwellings of the saints, and on every part of these relics are the marks of their lives. Every bone of St. Athanasius, for example, bears the qualities of St. Athanasius. Every molecule of his organs or his bones summarize his whole life.

**B.** Metanias offered to the fathers of the Church, the Patriarch or bishops, are the second type of Prostrations of Honor in which we honor them as a sign of our love

and obedience as they are ambassadors for Christ and successors of the Apostles in the holy Church. We also prostrate in worship to the Holy Spirit which dwells in them, through which they consecrate altars and ordain priests and deacons. The Holy Bible is full of evidence that Prostrations of Honor to the clergy are proper.

These are the different types of prostrations, see what good things are born in a man from this struggle. It often happens when a man bends his knees in prayer and stretches forth his hands to the heavens, fixing his eyes upon the cross of Christ and concentrating all of his thoughts on God during his prayer, beseeching God all the while with tears and compunction, suddenly and without warning a fountain Springs up in his heart gushing forth sweetness.<sup>2</sup> Who is the man that knows the delightful bending of the knees, when the tongue is still and the heart silently utters some doxology in the unbroken sweetness of its thoughts and the body is still, resting upon the knees. Just as the St. Paul says to present our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God. Among all virtues undertaken by people, loved by God, honored in the eyes of the angels, terrifying the demons and the power of darkness, granting knowledge, mercy and humility there is none better the making prostrations. Therefore, let us praise Him, and glorify Him, through prayer and fasting, and worship before Him.

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<sup>2</sup> Saint Isaac The Syrian, The Ascetical Homilies (Holy Transfiguration Monastery), Homily 4, P. 153