The Attributes of a Wise Shepherd

(5) Wise Master Builder

St. Paul prescribed the Lord Jesus Christ as a builder saying, “For every house is built by someone, but He who built all things is God” (Hebrews 3:4); and he prescribed served people saying, “You are God’s building” (1Corinthians 3:9); and finally he prescribed himself as a wise master builder saying, “According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it” (1Corinthians 3:10)

Although the building worker is called a builder yet his job is not only exclusive to the process of building but he many times needs to dig and to demolish. He moves along these different stages, i.e. demolishing, digging and building, not according to his own personal opinion and wisdom but according to architectural designs and an action plan set by the architect. He is required to follow these designs very accurately lest the building is ruined.

If St. Paul described himself to be a wise master builder, then this prescription must be applied to every faithful shepherd who watches his sheep.

Characteristic of a wise builder priest:

(1) He knows well that he is a mere builder and He who builds all things is God. This means that he serves neither with his own power nor according to his own personal wisdom but he rather implements the will of God, who is the artisan of all things, in the life of the people he serves according to His economy and accurate designs for the life of each one of them. He works to build everything according to God’s specifications.

(2) He knows, by the Holy Spirit, how to discern times in the life of the ones he serves. He therefore knows well when he must demolish and when he must build as there is “A time to break down, and a time to build up” (Ecclesiastes 3:3).

(3) When he demolishes, he does not demolish one’s being and breaks him down under the title of firmness and holy rebuke, but he rather uses God’s weapons to pull down strongholds and to cast down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God within the served one. A wise builder does not pull down a wall just because he finds pleasure in demolishing, but he demolishes as a part of a holistic plan of building. Likewise, a wise priest is not a clasher under the pretext of discipline, but he rather knows well that the times of demolishing are the times when he needs most to show God’s mercies and compassion.

(4) “For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1Corinthians 3:11). This means that the person of Jesus Christ, who is the cornerstone, is the pivot of any service the priest does. Therefore, a wise priest deviates not from this pivot turning the church into an institution for social services that lacks God’s presence. He builds upon rocks and not upon sands.
(5) He knows how to inspire his congregation with the spirit of unity and fellowship in order to make “the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord” (Ephesians 2:21). There is a priest who disperses and seeds strife, partiality and divisions; and there is a wise builder priest who knows well how to engrain piety’s heart unity in his congregation.

(6) He endures the afflictions of works of building with patience and courage. A builder is consumed by the drought in the day and the frost by night. He endures a lot of physical fatigue in order to complete his mission. This wise priest endures all service’s afflictions patiently and joyfully knowing well that when he overcomes he will be himself a “pillar in God’s temple” (Revelation 3:12).

(7) The measuring rod he uses in his service of building souls is “the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13). This means that he neither calms down nor rests until Christ is formed in his congregation and until he presents every man perfect in Christ Jesus.

(8) A wise builder accepts every instruction and modification from his supervisors in a humble and meek way. He considers them having a wider view and a deeper experience. Likewise, a wise priest obeys church authorities and submits to them without complaints and grumbles with a simple heart accepting every guidance as if from God’s mouth.

(9) A wise builder is a cautious builder who knows well the hazards of his job. He is at risk to fall down and is subjected to accidents at every moment. Therefore, he follows the safety instructions wearing the safety helmet watching his steps. Likewise, a wise builder priest is vigilant and watchful over his own salvation arming himself with Spirit’s weapons lest after he serves and builds many, he becomes himself demolished and rejected.

(10) A wise builder does not work alone but works in team and in harmony with the other builders as everyone complements the other’s work. Likewise, a wise builder priest works in harmony and unity with his fellow priests and his children deacons, servants and church board members. He knows well that every member in Christ’s body has his own function, talents and honor and that a member cannot function well without the remaining ones.

The Jesus Prayer

In the Jesus prayer there is fulfillment of the most sublime desire a Christian can yearn for, that of being in perpetual abiding in the presence of God; a state recommended often in the Holy Bible. "Then He spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart" (Luke 18:1) "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). This prayer appeared first among the Egyptian desert fathers. However, the addition by some non Egyptian external elements of some complicated rituals caused Christians to regard this prayer as specific to monks and consecrates.

What is the essence of this prayer? Why do we call it the perpetual prayer? What is the secret of its power? How is it to be practiced? Why does Satan hate it more than any other prayer? What are its expected fruits? How can it be protected? Answers to these questions are the subject of this article.
The Essence of the Jesus Prayer
In its essence, this prayer is a response to God's calling to live with him in a continuous fellowship of love. St. Theophan the Recluse says, "Continuous, uninterrupted prayer is the continuity of man's solemn presence before God. It is also an internally hidden, perpetual glow caused by constant alertness in throwing wood (prayer words) onto that inflamed furnace (the Holy Spirit) so that it does not die out." The Fathers have succeeded in achieving this state through saying and repeating short prayers expressing their desire to offer thanksgiving, supplications or repentance to God. They have found a lot of spiritual satisfaction that pushed them to practice this prayer incessantly. The amount of spiritual depth in this prayer is inexpressible in words because it is a hidden personal experience arrived at by connecting with the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Reality of Perceptual Prayer
God's command to pray always is not impossible "Then He spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart" (Luke 18:1), because, when God commands He assists. For example, when a charitable person asks a poor man standing at his doorsteps to enter his house to eat; all it takes the poor man is to step in the house in order to win the prepared dinner. It is the same with God. When He asks us to pray continuously, it is because He wants to bestow His grace upon us as much as we can receive. How can we receive except through perpetual praying. All we have to do is take the first step and call in the name of Jesus.

Perpetual praying in the literal sense of the word is not practical. For, throughout the day we perform various duties such as work, study, talk and sleep. All these activities render perpetual praying rather impossible whether vocally or mutely. How can this situation be compromised with God's desire? The early fathers claim that whoever protects his mind with the remembrance of Jesus Christ's name during his free time, all his works will come forth anointed with the spirit of prayer. St. Basil the Great expressed that when he talked about the disciples saying that they thought of God while doing all their works in total reliance upon Him. Consequently such a spiritual life became their perpetual prayer life.

If God's command to "pray without ceasing" does include sleeping time, how can it be practically achievable? It is scientifically proven that activities carried out during waking hours are retrievable during sleep in the form of dreams, pictures and shadows. Hence, throughout the day, whoever occupies his mind with prayer and fellowship with Jesus Christ, will have his night turned into prayers and extended fellowship with Jesus Christ. St. Ephraim says, "a person in whom the Holy Spirit dwells will pray incessantly and fervently; because the Holy Spirit will pray within him all the time while sleeping or awake, eating or drinking, busy or free. Even when in deep sleep, [the aroma of his prayers is breathed out every second]."

The saints have found a route to perpetual prayers specifically through Jesus prayer because from one side it befits all spiritual levels and from the other side using short utterances allow for easy, continuous uninterrupted praying. Such concentration relieves the mind alleviating the burden of shifting from words to thoughts to meditations as is the case with other forms of prayers.

The Secret in the Power of the Jesus Prayer
The power of this prayer is the love of God. After having offered His only begotten Son for us, it would not please God to see us regress once again into Satan's bosom. So, He prepared for us a means by which we can enjoy His company perpetually. This easy means is enjoyable to the soul to walk through its alleys and it befits a beginner as well as an advanced, a learned as well as an unlearned. This is because God's love is for all. Father Isaac says to St. John Casian [Jesus Christ prayed for us saying] "that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. (John 17:21) and "And I have declared to them Your name, and will declare it, that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them." (John 17:26). When God's perfect love touches our hearts with the effectiveness of this prayer which Jesus Christ had prayed for us and which was answered right away, then God Himself becomes all our love, desire, aspiration and longing, every thought we think, every word we say, and every breath we take. Then we become in a secret Union with the Father and the Son through this pure love that overshadows the heart and mind. This love and union are the aim of our life that we aspire for and which precedes the joy of the heavenly life. When we recognize this love within us, our life becomes one continuous prayer.

How to Practice the Jesus Prayer
Jesus prayer has no particular rituals. Because it is a continuous prayer, it can be exercised in any place at any time. It is not restricted to special people because God's call of love is for everyone.

Therefore, there is no special bodily posture to be taken while praying the Jesus prayer. It is permissible while sitting or standing, or walking. Father John Kroonstad said, [If you are a scholar, student, officer, researcher or worker, remember that the first and most important thing you should learn in life is to know Christ's salvation, the holy Trinity, daily fellowship through prayers, services in church and repeating the name of Jesus in your heart because it is the power of God for salvation].

With regard to the words used in praying, the early fathers prefer not to hop from one sentence to the other in order to avoid confusing the mind. According to St. Macarius, the Jesus' prayer started out as a one word prayer, mainly repeating the name of Jesus only. Later on it developed to full expressions the most famous of which are "My Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me" and "My Lord Jesus help me".

So, it is suggested that one start with one statement and repeat it quietly making a short stop between one repetition and the other. One may choose to articulate the prayer or pray internally in silence according to the direction of the Holy Spirit. For, giving the Holy Spirit the liberty to guide us will prepare us to be taken to the depth of hidden prayers that exist behind the words. As for beginners, they have to assign special times for practicing the Jesus prayer till they become used to it and taste its sweetness. Then they will be able to practice it freely driven to it at convenient and even inconvenient times.

How to Overcome Obstacles against the Jesus Prayer
If Satan does not bear to see us pray part of the time, how much more would the evil powers be upset seeing us praying all the time? They would definitely snare powerfully at us. However this should not frighten us at all, because in praying all the time we would be obeying God's order
which automatically holds power in its folds. Therefore, let us enter into this holy covenant fortified and strengthened by the Holy Spirit because the season of planting is short, that of reaping is close and the fruit of the Jesus prayer is delicious.

**Articles on the Christian History - The Fourth Century**

**61. The last seven years in St. Athanasius' life (February 1, 366 AD to May 2, 373 AD)**

1. **The Major Incidents**

   At the age of seventy, two major incidents took place that disturbed those last seven years of St. Athanasius' life.

   **First Incident:** In 366 AD the Caesarian church was burned down by the pagans. However, the emperor issued punitive decrees against the doers and ordered the rebuilding of the church which was implemented in May 368 AD on the expenses of the empire.

   **Second Incident:** In an attempt to enter Alexandria and take over one of the churches wherein to have all the scattered Arians gathered, the Arian Bishop Lucius, like a thief, arrived stealthily one night of September 367 AD. But as soon as the Alexandrians knew about the conspiracy, they arranged for a defensive strike back in the morning. However, at the last minute Lucius got saved by a military group sent by the governor and was shipped out of Alexandria on September 26, 367 AD.

2. **The Alexandria Synod (369 AD)**

   In spite of age, travelling hardships and the stress of defending the Orthodox faith; at the age of seventy-one, St. Athanasius was more adamant to defend the Orthodox Nicene Faith till the last breath keeping before his eyes St. Paul's advice to St. Timothy his disciple "That good thing which was committed to you, keep by the Holy Spirit who dwells in us" (2 Timothy 1:14).

   Getting to know that Ursacius, one of the leaders of the Ariminum Arian Synod was still spreading his poisonous Arian teachings among the congregations in the biggest churches in Milan, and that Bishop Damasus who became Bishop over Rome also (in 366 AD) was not doing any effort to stop Ursacius, St Athanasius could not stand still without facing that danger even if it were in Rome. So, he gathered ninety bishops from Egypt and Libya and sent a detailed explanatory message of complaint and warning to all the bishops in Egypt and Africa. They, in turn, sent an encouraging message to Damasus asking him to take action. However, the latter did not do anything till that Arian died in his Arianism in the year 374 AD.

   Although that was the main agenda on the Alexandria Synod meeting; yet St. Athanasius took it a chance to spread the correct understanding of the Orthodox Nicene faith in all the West starting with Italy in the North West to Spain and to the African shores in the South. St. Athanasius wanted to ensure the effacing of the Ariminum Synod decisions from the people's minds. For, the last Synod decisions were published by Constantius through oppression and weaponry. In the Alexandria Synod recommendations, St. Athanasius adopted the approach of comparing between the Nicene recommendations and those of the other synod. Then he would follow the comparison with elaboration on the greatness of the Nicene faith through his divine understanding of the holy Word granted to him by the Holy Spirit. After that, through substantial proof; he would explain to everyone the voidance of Aryanism stripping off its barrenness of truth and theological support.
3. The Remainder of St Athanasius' Last Works

After the Alexandria Synod, St. Athanasius spent the rest of his life writing letters and small scattered publications among which were letters to the monks, especially those in upper Egypt, and to the bishops of Antioch as well as letters to St. Basil Bishop of Caesarea Cappadocia, to St. Gregory the Nazianzus, St. Gregory of Nyssa and some members in the congregation. Those writings reveal St. Athanasius' meekness, wisdom and great desire to win weak souls. In the year 372 AD, he wrote two books against the errors of Apollinaris who had started spreading the thought that Jesus Christ did not possess a soul because his incarnated body and soul were from his deity. St. Athanasius refuted these thoughts with very deep and theologically sound replies.

St. Athanasius continued to write, explain and reply to messages from the bishops who respected him as a true spiritual father for all the churches in the world and as an assistance to the persecuted bishops. His messages and interventions were received with great respect by all the bishops around the world.

At the age of 75, St. Athanasius would have been a Pope for forty-five years during which he served not only Alexandria, his see, but the whole world.

St. Athanasius was the candle that burned to give light in the midst of the Arian darkness throughout the ages. Although St. Athanasius reposed in body, yet his spirit of the true Orthodox doctrine remained and will remain alive to the end of the ages witnessing before God and before the world for his faithfulness to the last breath. How true is the expression, "without Athanasius the whole world would have turned to Arianism".

After his death, the church called St. Athanasius "the apostle" in honor of his relentless, continuous striving to defend the true faith till the end. It was said about him, "Athanasius's life was a continuous martyrdom" and "Athanasius lived in the truth that does not die".

St Athanasius in a Few Succinct Words

On the 15th of May 373 AD, this great man died at the age of seventy two after having spent forty six years as Pope of the See of Alexandria. He had been a disciple of St. Anthony for three years after which he wrote his biography. As a deacon, he attended the Synod at Nicaea with Pope Alexandros and participated a lot in the reconstitution of the Faith Creed of Nicaea. He wrote a lot of articles the most famous of which is his book, "The Incarnation of the Word" written against the Arians. He was the first Alexandrian Pope to care for the Ethiopians having appointed Frumentius by the name of Bishop Salama as the first Bishop. Athanasius was exposed to a lot of persecutions by the Arians. He was exiled five times during the reign of sixteen emperors. The Coptic Orthodox Church titled Athanasius "the apostle" for the tremendous efforts he had offered to safeguard the true Orthodox faith.