

OUR DUTY DURING LENT¹

Beginning of Lent, 1976

An adequate article for Lent by our late spiritual father, Father Matta El-Meskeen, to strengthen us in our journey in life, written back in 1976. Enjoy! NB: All quotations are taken from the NKJV, if not otherwise mentioned.

DEAR BRETHREN.

In the beginning of Lent, I would like to remind you that the spiritual strategy of our beatified fathers in the Lord rests primarily on asceticism. Asceticism is to keep one's body, soul, and spirit holy to the Lord with the help of grace, the efficacy of the word, and the authority of the divine mystery.

Concerning the *help of grace*, it is free of charge. It is offered to whoever asks, seeks, or knocks at the door of the Lord's compassion, according to the words of the Savior:

If a son asks for bread from any father among you, will he give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent instead of a fish? Or if he asks for an egg, will he offer him a scorpion? If you, then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him? (Lk 11:11-13).

So the Lord calls our attention to the fact that it is the Father who offers the Holy Spirit graciously in response to our petition and request through the boldness of His Son Jesus Christ our Lord. The role of the Holy Spirit in asceticism is one of a captain to a ship.

Concerning the efficacy of the word, if the word of Scripture is taken seriously, its power lies in the purification of body, soul and spirit. It has the searing effect of fire and the smashing effect of a hammer. For Scripture says through the prophet Jeremiah, "what is the chaff to the wheat?" says the Lord. "Is not My word like a fire?" says the Lord, "and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?" (Jer 23:28-29).

The Word of God pierces like a two-edged sword that penetrates to the secret division of soul and spirit (cf Heb 4:12). It exposes all the petty excuses of the soul which she claims belong to the spirit but are actually the result of her own ailment and malady. The Word makes its way lightly and discerningly, more sharply than a sword, to reach hidden sins in

¹ Matthew the Poor, *Sojourners* (Wadi al-Natrun, Egypt: St Macarius Press, 2019): 46-51. This letter is taken from the book under the title *Rasā'il al-Qummuṣ Mattā al-Miskīn* (Monastery of Saint Macarius, Wādī al-Naṭrūn 2007) and corresponds to letter 52, *al-Ni'ma wa-l-Kalima wa-l-Sirr* (Grace, Word and Mystery, 185-193).

bone marrow. The Word exposes sins that are hidden within the folds of joints and the nodes of one's soul. It lays bare what the conscience has surreptitiously retained across the years and what has been hidden in the heart away from light.

However, the Word of God can only do these things at the instigation of grace. One's aim and target should be single and clear—surrender of one's life to God.

As for the power of *divine mystery*, it is the exclusive work of Christ in the elect, who are the children of His own mystery. He sprinkles them with His blood and thus they are encompassed by the mystery of redemption that initiates them into divine light. To this effect St. John says, "But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin" (1Jn 1:7).

In this Lent, all of the above-mentioned means of asceticism (namely grace, word and mystery) join together with an extraordinary power. This is because Christ Himself leads us in this ascetic procession, fasting and praying alone. The monks used to 'race' during this fast to reach a high state of spiritual vigilance. They fathomed the mystical depths of the spiritual gifts which used to revive the whole church on this occasion year after year. Their fiery zeal and divine love used to set the hearts of novices and beginners ablaze. They devoured the sloth of the lazy and rubbed off the rust from lagging hearts. They spurred them to stand up, run the good race and renew their covenant. The vision of Christ as an ascetic, triumphant leader on the mount of fasting used to inspire the whole church.

The season of fasting comes this year while the whole world looks forward to Him who would save, for the stroke has reached from the sole of the foot even to the crown of the head (cf Is 1:6). The case is well near the throes of death and everybody is looking to us for help. People are seeking demonstration of the life that is within us. Are we not monks who supposedly die to the world every day? I hate to say that even though we own nothing but our tears, we have become like a tree that has held back its fruit at the season of fruition. Its plight is in danger for the owner of the garden would demand the land be cleared were it not for the generous gardener who stands pleading that the tree have just one more year (cf Lk 13:8).

Therefore, the burden of prayer for the whole Church and the whole world is laid upon you. It is God who has laid it upon us with its demands and exorbitant price. What is needed is prayer that would shake the heavens—prayer of agony, suffering and intense grief; prayer of pouring sweat like that of Gethsemane; prayer of travail and birth pangs like that of a woman in labor. As St Paul says, "my little children, for whom I labor in birth again until Christ is formed in you" (Gal 4:19). It is *you* who are the womb which is destined to conceive sinners painfully until the birth pangs come through the Holy Spirit from on high. The Church would then deliver them in an acceptable year and a time of salvation. We have prayed much but not the desired prayer of anticipation that concludes with nothing short of response on God's part. It is a matter of commitment and is not optional; for the sinner either goes to hell or is born for life eternal. The gulf is enormous and we are the ones to blame.

