



The Spiritual Teaching of His Holiness Pope Kyrillos the Sixth On Fasting and the Renunciation of the Self

Personal Memoirs of Dr. George Habib Bebawi

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Introduction

That Great Lent the discussion was unusually long, and here is some of it. Hegoumen Mina the Recluse had realized that the prevalent teaching about fasting had been reduced to abstinence from animal food, and from food until three o'clock in the afternoon, or sunset--as was his practice. This teaching was exclusive to conspicuous behaviors and external activities, and nothing was said of what ought to happen in the heart. It was undoubtedly beneficial to hear instructions on how to repent from idle talk, swearing, cursing, fasting from bad deeds, and so on. However, to simply refrain from such deeds is not what is required in and of itself. The monastic recluse, Hegoumen Mina, used to say that these are externalizations of an underlying illness, which is the estrangement of the soul from the Lord Jesus Christ, and its lack of adherence to Him. Extraneous behavior is nothing more than a sign of what is taking place internally, and a manifestation of what is rooted in the soul.

From here began the instruction, in the precision, gentleness, and humility of a father with a spiritual son, who is a beginner that knows very little.

The True Beginning to the Fast of the Soul

After the liturgy of the Second Wednesday of Great Lent, he said to me, "Keep the words that I am about to tell you in your heart, and live by them. The First Man, Adam, became self-entrapped within himself when he was exiled from Paradise, and from God Himself. That means that he lived within his mind and heart, and His love for God became selfish love. This is why we are beginning from the first rung of the ladder, which is the outset of the Fall."

"The fast is a constraint of intemperate self-love; or, according to the words of the Lord of Glory, Our Lord Jesus Christ, a renunciation of the ego. I know very well that you will ask me, 'Alright. How do I begin?' The beginning is simultaneously easy and difficult. It is easy, because it is a graspable concept to the mind and thoughts of man. It is difficult, because it is an ongoing labor of the heart and will. This means you must set aside your own intentions and accord in order to be united to the Lord Jesus Christ alone."

"Detachment from one's will and intent is realized through the invocation of the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ, as in the Psalis that pertain to the Name of the Lord of Glory. When I asked you to memorize the Psalis, it was not so you can become a cantor. Rather, it was so that you may learn to curb your own volition in order to ask for the will of the Lord Jesus Christ. This will be difficult at first, and may even be contrary to your disposition."

"Serve your brothers, for example, before you serve yourself."

"You might ask, 'What, then, is the purpose of fasting from food?'"

"Abstinence from food means that you are setting it aside. Man has a will that is asking for food. When you willingly withhold from food, you will learn to control your thoughts, leanings, and all that is hidden within your heart. The heart is a great treasury that stores all the lusts and desires of man."

"When you fast, retreat from the company of people in order to pray and study the Holy Books. Attending the prayers of the Church is also a retreat from the world."

"May Christ, our Good God, grant you spiritual power, for you are about to withdraw from the world with your heart in order to walk after your Master, the Lord Jesus."

"Confessing the divinity of the Lord of Glory is vain, if it is done solely with the lips and tongue. You ought to have the obedience of love, for it is love that will turn you around, and make you seek what it means to deny yourself (Man's revolution from a path towards the self and the ego, to one that is Godbound)."

"Listen to my words, and keep them firm in your heart in the Name and Power of the Lord Jesus Christ."

After the absolution, he said to me, "Instruction is easy, but application is hard. May the Power of the Lord Jesus support us, for He is happy to see our souls fasting from the love of the ego, and on its way back to the love of God."

The Weakness of the Will, and Its Remedy

After the Friday liturgy of the same week, he said to me, “My son, the will is naturally weak, for it is moved by the desires of the heart, and the love of man. We must know that love is truly a force that creates much, and destroys much. Without love, man cannot carry his cross and follow the Lord Jesus. The weakness of the will is precisely equal to the frailty of man’s love.”

“St. Isaac says that the soul’s lack of a clear aim is a scattering of its energy. Moreover, the Lord of Glory said, ‘No man can serve two masters.’ This means that if man gathers his love and keeps it intact, he is moving in the right direction. The first remedy for the human will is for man to walk on two feet: love, and the one goal, who is the Lord Jesus, the True Bridegroom of the soul, with whom we must be eternally united.”

“You ought to have before you every day your immovable destiny, who is the Lord Jesus, and to carry your cross with love.”

“One of the elders at the monastery used to tell us, when we were novices, that we should sell ourselves to Christ, just as the servant who sold himself, and had no other master in his life except Jesus Christ. In order for this to happen, you have to ask for the fiery love of God, the fiery Spirit, of whom St. Antony spoke.”¹

“Without the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and His work within, the human soul remains incapable of being set ablaze with the Divine Love. This is why the holy Abba Antony called the Holy Spirit, the Fiery Spirit.”²

“The remedy for the weakness of the will, as I told before, is love, and the one goal.”

“Now, practically, you must have a rule; not for subjugation, or hard labor. No; The purpose of a rule is to set a path for you. They used to tell us, ‘The rule! The rule!’ Then, I asked one of the elders about it, and he said, ‘Mina, the rule of a monk is the parameter of monasticism: the cell, fasting, retreat, solitude (when you grow), and keeping the Name of the Lord Jesus.’”

“For you, the rule is the parameter of Great Lent. That is, if you do not attend the liturgy, pray by yourself. Pay no attention to people. Retreat in order to remain in communion with the Lord

¹ Translator’s note: This is found in the Eighth Letter of St. Ammonas, whose letters are often attributed to St. Antony the Great. Dr. Bebawi proceeds to cite here the pertinent excerpt of the letter.

“Now if you desire to receive it, you will give yourselves to bodily toil and toil of heart, and stretch your thoughts up to heaven night and day, asking with all your heart for the Holy [Arabic: Fiery] Spirit, and this will be given you, for such was in Elijah the Tishbite and Elisha and all the other prophets. And see that there never enter into your hearts thoughts of doubt, saying, ‘Who will be able to receive this?’ Therefore permit not these thoughts to enter your minds, but ask in uprightness and you will receive. And I, your father, will pray on your behalf, that you may receive it; for I know that you have denied yourselves in order to do so. For he who toils in every generation will receive this same Spirit, which dwells in those who are upright of heart. And I bear witness of you, that you seek God with an upright heart” (*The Letters of Ammonas, Successor of Saint Antony*, trans. Derwas J. Chitty [SLG Press, 1979], 9–10).

² Hegoumen Mina the Recluse—His Holiness Pope Kyrillos the Sixth—made me (Dr. George Bebawi) study *The Letters of St. Antony*, and gave me an oral test on them in April 1958.

Jesus. Speak less in order to be able to pray with your heart. This is what will heal the will, and restore man to His Lord and Redeemer, Jesus Christ. The rule is easy, but consistency is the essence. Do not let a day, or an hour, go by without making the Sign of the Cross, and keeping the Name of the Lord Jesus. Through this, you will find the joy of Paradise within your heart.”

“God be with you.”

Many long years have gone by, and the rule—the parameter of life—remains the same.

Pray for me, my father, Pope Kyrillos the Sixth.

Your spiritual son,

George Habib Bebawi

The Church of St. Mina, Old Cairo
1957-1958