

Saint Makarios Of Egypt - Conversation 19

Christians, wishing to advance and grow, ought to push themselves toward every good so as to free themselves from every habitual sin and be filled by the Holy Spirit.

1. The person that wishes to come to the Lord and to be deemed worthy of eternal life and to become the dwelling place of Christ and to be filled with the Holy Spirit so that he may be able to bring forth the fruits of the Spirit and perform the commandments of Christ purely and blamelessly ought to begin first by believing firmly in the Lord and giving himself completely to the words of his commands and renouncing the world in all things so that his whole mind may not be taken up with anything ephemeral. And he ought to persevere constantly in prayer, always waiting in faith that expects his coming and his help, keeping the goal of his mind ever fixed upon this. Then he ought to push himself to every good work and to doing all the commandments of the Lord, because there is sin dwelling within him. Thus let him strive to show humility before every person and to consider himself the least and the worst. Let him not seek honor or praise or the glory of men as it is written in the Gospel (Jn 12:44). But let him only have always before his eyes the Lord and his commands, wishing to please him alone in the meekness of his heart, as the Lord says: "Learn of me, because I am meek and humble of heart and you will find rest for your souls" (Mt 11:29).

2. Likewise, let him accustom himself to be merciful, compassionate, and good according to his power, as the Lord says: "Be good and kind, even as your heavenly Father is merciful" (Lk 6:36). And again he says: "If you love me, keep my commandments" (Jn 14:15). And again: "Strive to enter through the narrow door" (Lk 13:24). Above all, let him take the humility and conduct of the Lord, his meekness and conversation, as his model by ever remembering him. Let him continue incessantly in prayers, always beseeching and believing that the Lord may come to dwell in him and may perfect and give him power to accomplish all his commands and that the Lord himself may become the dwelling place for his soul.

And thus, the things he now does with effort of a reluctant heart, he may perform one day willingly, accustoming himself always to the good and remembering the Lord and waiting for him always in great love. Then the Lord, seeing such an intention and his good diligence, how he strives to remember the Lord and always seeks to do good and is humble and meek and loving, how he guides his heart, whether he wishes or not to the best of his ability with force, has mercy on him and frees him from his enemies and the indwelling sin. He fills him with the Holy Spirit. And gradually without force or struggle he keeps all the Lord's commandments in truth. Or, rather, it is the Lord who keeps in him his very own commandments and then he brings forth purely the fruits of the Spirit.

3. It is, however, necessary at first for one coming to the Lord force himself thus to do good and, even if he should not in his heart be so inclined, he must constantly await his mercy with unshakened faith and push himself to love, even if he does not

have love. He ought to push himself to meekness, even if he has none, to mercy and to have a merciful heart. He must force himself to be disregarded, and when he is looked down upon by others, let him rejoice. When he is made light of or dishonored, let him not become angry according to the saying: "Beloved, do not avenge yourselves" (Rom 12:19). Let him push himself to prayer even when he does not possess the prayer of the Spirit. And so. God, seeing him striving so and pushing himself by determination, even if the heart is unwilling, gives him the authentic prayer of the Spirit gives him true charity, true meekness, "the bowels of mercies" (Col 3:12), true kindness, and, simply put, fills him with the fruits of the Spirit.

4. If a person pushes himself to attain prayer alone, when he has none, in order to attain its grace, without striving earnestly for meekness and humility and charity and all the other commandments of the Lord, neither taking pains nor struggling and battling to succeed in these as far as his choice and free will go, he may at times be given a grace of prayer with some degree of repose and pleasure from the Spirit according as he asks. But he has the same traits he had before. He has no meekness, because he did not seek it with effort and he did not prepare himself beforehand to become meek. He has no humility, since he did not ask for it and did not push himself to have it. He has no charity toward all men, because he was not concerned with it and did not strive for it in his asking for the gift of prayer. And in doing his work, he has no faith or trust in God, since he did not know that he was without it. And he did not take the pains to seek from the Lord for himself to have a firm faith and an authentic trust.

5. For just as he forces himself to prayer, even when unwilling, so, everyone must push himself likewise to trust, so also to humility, so to charity, so to meekness, sincerity, and simplicity, so "unto every patience and long-suffering with joy" (Col 1: 11), so also to regard himself as little and to consider himself as poor and the least of all. He strives not to speak without profit, but always to be concerned to speak the things of God with mouth and heart. He is attentive not to become angry and loud-mouthed according to the saying, "Let all bitterness and anger and clamoring be put away from you, with all malice" (Eph 4:3 1). He strives to live according to all the ways of the Lord, in the practice of virtue and good and noble conduct, to possess all manifestations of goodness, of humility, of meekness, never being proud and high-minded and puffed up and never to speak against anyone.

6. In all of these matters a person must push himself if he desires to gain the approval of and be pleasing to Christ so that the Lord, seeing his determination and purpose in forcing himself to all goodness and kindness and humility and charity and prayer with full determination, may give himself completely to him. The Lord himself does all of these things in truth in him without labor and force, which before he could not perform, even by his own determination, because of sin that indwelt in him. And now all the practice of virtues comes to him as though the virtues are a part of his nature. The reason is really that the Lord comes and dwells in him and he is in the Lord. The Lord himself operates in him to accomplish his own commandments, effortlessly now, filling him with the fruit of the Spirit. But if anyone forces himself only to possess the virtue of prayer, until he receives that gift from God, but does not similarly push himself to those

other virtues, he cannot really perform them purely and faultlessly. He must orientate himself toward what good he is capable of doing.

Sometimes the divine grace comes to him as he is asking and imploring. For God is good and kind and he gives to those who ask him whatever they are seeking. If one does not strive to be good, does not possess the virtues already mentioned and has not even prepared himself for them, he loses the grace which he has acquired and falls because of pride, or he does not make progress nor increase in the grace that came to him because he does not give himself purposefully to the Lord's commandments. For the dwelling place and the repose of the Spirit is humility, charity, and meekness and the other commandments of the Lord.

7. Therefore, it is necessary that whoever wishes truly to please God and receive from him the heavenly grace of the Spirit and to grow and be perfected in the Holy Spirit should force himself to observe the commandments of God and to make his heart submissive, even if he is unwilling according to the saying, "Therefore, I observe all thy commandments and every false way I abhor" (Ps 119:128). As one pushes and compels himself to persevere in prayer until he succeeds, similarly, if he wishes and forces and compels himself to practice all the virtues and develops a good habit, he thus asks and begs of the Lord always. And obtaining his request and receiving a taste for God and becoming a participator of the Holy Spirit, he makes the gift given to him to increase and to thrive as he rests in humility, in charity, and in meekness.

8. The Spirit himself graces him with all of these virtues and teaches him authentic prayer, authentic charity, authentic meekness, for which he pushed himself and sought to possess them. And he had a concern and thought about them and they were given him. And thus, growing and becoming perfect in God, he is deemed worthy to become an heir of the kingdom. For the humble person never falls. Where would he fall since he is lower than all others? A proud mind is a great humiliation, while humility is a great uplifting of the mind and an honor and dignity. Let us, then, push ourselves and strive to obtain humility, even though our heart is unwilling, to obtain meekness and charity by praying and begging God in faith and hope and love unceasingly with such expectancy and purpose so that he may send his Spirit into our hearts in order that we may pray and "worship God in spirit and in truth" (Jn 4:24).

9. Let us pray that the Spirit may teach us true prayer which now we are unable to accomplish even through our earnest striving. He will teach us how to accomplish, with hearts of compassion, kindness and all the other commandments of the Lord truly without any trouble and force since the Spirit himself knows how to fill us with his fruit. And so we fulfill the commandments of God through his Spirit, who alone knows the will of the Lord. The Spirit has perfected us in himself and he is perfected in us as we are purified from all defilement and stain of sin, as he presents us as beautiful brides, pure and spotless, to Christ. We rest in God, in his kingdom, and God rests in us for all ages unending. Glory to his tender compassion and mercy and love that he has deigned to bestow such honor and glory to the human race and to deign to make them sons of the heavenly Father and has called them his own brothers. To him be glory forever. Amen.

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