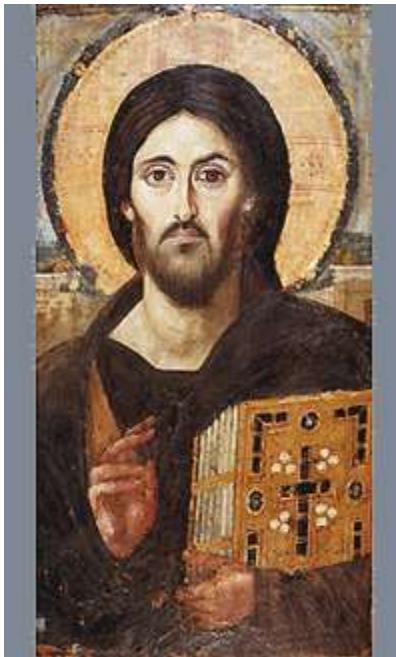


Our Relationship with Christ

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He who was able to reveal this relationship with Christ is St. Paul who says:

“For surely you have already heard of the commission of God’s grace that was given me for you, and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ” (Eph. 3:2-4).

What is the mystery of Paul the Apostle’s knowledge of Christ? In other words, what is the mystery of Christ?

This is the title of this sermon: “Our relationship with Christ.” The Apostle Paul began this relationship from time immemorial. There is no doubt that Christ’s mystery is our relationship as believers in Him since the very beginning. How? It is the mystery of the Father in His love for humankind, as St. Paul says in his epistle to the Ephesians:

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places” (Eph 1:3).

Here I will pause for a moment, to draw your attention, O monk (or any other person), you who want Christ to have a relationship with you. It is in essence that God the Father has blessed us

with every spiritual blessing in heaven, according to His own free will, because of His Divine love for mankind.

What does “blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places” mean?

It means that God the Father, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, gave us His heavenly blessing, for us to be a new heavenly creation, accepted and loved before Him, on the same level of the heavenly creatures, even more, because St. Paul says: “with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places”, which means higher than the angels and archangels and all heavenly creatures. How? It is because He blessed us through His only Beloved Son who has all the Father’s love. For he says: “Who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.” If we are blessed in Christ His only Beloved Son, then our blessing is of the same level as His Son’s blessing, and consequently of the same level as the Father’s love for His Son.

Paul the Apostle adds:

“Even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him in love” (Eph 1:4).

What does it mean?

This verse means that the Father blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, and accordingly chose us in Christ since the beginning to reach, in the future or at the end of our new creation, the stature of the fullness of Christ, which means the stature of His only Son, as Paul the Apostle says somewhere else in the same epistle: “To equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:12, 13).

What is the consequent result?

The result is that our new creation will reach the stature of the fullness of Christ, meaning that we will have priority and pre-eminence when we stand in the Father’s presence. Thus we will stand before God the Father, on the same level as the saints who are without blemish or blame, in the Divine love that fills the Father’s heart towards us, being equal as special sons to the Father as Paul the Apostle continues saying:

“He destined us to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will” (Eph 1:5).

The adoption by God the Father that mankind now possesses was previously set and defined from time immemorial, certainly not because mankind deserved it, but due to God the Father's will and pleasure. This means that it is due to an inner pleasure within God's heart that makes us sons in His Son. What a joy for mankind, and a pleasure at the Father's pleasure, for making us His sons in His Son Jesus Christ! Our partnership nowadays with Jesus Christ emanates from our partnership in the Father choosing us as His sons, which means that a partnership with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ was determined and fixed from eternity. St. Paul the Apostle boasts of it and says that our partnership now with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ was fulfilled with the Son's manifestation, and the manifestation of eternal life in Him, in the shape of a man who was killed, dead, and resurrected.

St. Paul considered the choosing of God the Father in Christ since the beginning, with all the heavenly blessings offered to us, a free grace flowing from the heart of God towards us. All this grace exists on the basis that we remain and continue to praise His glorious grace, which he bestowed on us in the Beloved:

"To the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved" (Eph 1:6).

This is our only work now, and forever more, to continue to praise God's glorious grace, which He lavished on us in His Beloved Son Jesus Christ since the beginning.

Notice dear brethren what a grace has come to happen and was confirmed to us from time immemorial:

- That God should bless us with every spiritual blessing in Christ
- And choose us in Him before the creation of the world
- To become saints without blame before Him through love
- Already chosen through Jesus Christ for adoption
- For Himself and according to the pleasure of His will
- To praise His glorious grace which He bestowed on us in the Beloved
- This is the heavens' witness and the testimony of the Spirit speaking through Saint Paul.
- Behold and see, sons of God, and know today, that you are appointed since time immemorial to become saints without blame in the fullness of God's love, that is Christ's, who is in you and you in Him.
- Have you accepted this grace today?
- Have you pledged in your hearts and consciences to truly be sons of God in accordance to the pleasure of His will?
- This grace is offered to you today and every day. Accept it, and live it, as you should in accordance to the ethics, principles, and behavior of the saints, as sons of God and the eternal life you were called to.

Peter the Apostle today participates with us and testifies to you before God and Christ:

“Conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile. You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. He was destined before the foundation of the world but was made manifest at the end of the times for your sake” (1 Pet 1:17-20).

What does this mean?

It is an authentication from the same Spirit that spoke through Paul the Apostle. Because the Apostle Peter spoke and added that your redemption was fulfilled from time immemorial through the blood of Christ. So you are the sons of the living God, redeemed by the blood of Christ, meaning reconciled through Christ having gained all reasons and conditions for holiness. Therefore be holy as your Father is holy, He who invited you to share His holiness through Christ.

Paul the Apostle testifies to you and so does the Apostle Peter. Today I encourage you with Paul the Apostle’s testimony, that you are the sons of the living God sanctified before Him without blame in the love of Christ. Your only work is to praise His glorious grace, which the Father bestowed on you in His Beloved Son.

But I warn you, according to Peter the Apostle’s testimony, that you were redeemed with the blood of Christ, to put an end to your old behavior which you have taken from the world, and live in the fear of God without blame or sin. For you are counted as saints before the angels and the world.

“And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (Gal 5:24).

The monastic life you accepted is the same as the crucifixion of the flesh with its passions and desires. Listen to the Apostle Paul warning the Corinthians and revealing to them who will enter the Kingdom of God and who will be forbidden and outlawed from entering the Kingdom of God! I repeat it bearing witness to you before God and to clear my conscience as this monastery’s father responsible for you all to enter into the Kingdom of God:

“Do not be deceived (or let anyone deceive you): neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor sexual perverts, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor 6:9, 10).

If we are caught with one of these deadly sins after having been cleansed (meaning baptized), nay sanctified and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and with the Spirit of our Lord, it means that we disdain the Spirit of grace we received through baptism, and we defile the holy flesh in which we commune at the altar.

Now is the time for repentance, but after it where can we find repentance except in monasticism? If not, the future will be like Esau's: "For he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears" (Heb 12:17). You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood as Paul the Apostle says to the Hebrews: "In your struggle against sin" (Heb 12:4).

Here, in this monastery, is the place for repentance, and the time for the struggle against sin.

This day, now, I will lead you through the Spirit of God to the way to struggle against sin:

First and foremost I assure you in the name of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, that there does not exist in the world he who has struggled, or is struggling against sin in his full vigor or health, because there exists no power in the world that has conquered sin, except Jesus Christ who shed His blood as its price, and purchased us from the hell of sin, the power of the devil, and the temptation of the world and flesh with His blood on the cross.

The only way, the way to struggle against sin is: resort to Christ with all the power, determination, patience, and forbearance. How?

1. Enter Your Room

Enter your room, shut the door, and pray in secret to your Father who is unseen and He will reward you openly. Cry to Christ day and night. Here I bring you Christ's promise to answer your cries night and day:

"And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them" (Lk 18:7, 8).

2. For what do we cry out?

- We cry out to Christ to take care of the creation He purchased with His blood.
- We cry out, casting before Him mind, conscience, and all the imaginations of the mind and soul for Him to accept them.

- We cry out to Him to kill carnal appetites, thoughts, and impurities of this old flesh, which He destroyed at the cross, so that we might live in the new being according to God, in righteousness and the sanctity of truth.
- We cry out to provide us with His grace, and power that are able to give the soul and spirit Christ's strength, to defeat the devil's forces that fight our thoughts following his desire to capture us once more under the power of sin.
- We cry out to give us purity of mind, heart, and conscience, so as to wash and purify them through His blood from all deadly thoughts and deeds.
- We cry out to give us the power to pray, and stand in vigil and fasting before Him, for Him to disperse all the enemy's assaults, and lead us to the way of righteousness and piety before Him for the rest of our days, to worship Him in piety and fear, and praise His glorious grace, which His Father bestowed on us through His choice and adoption of us, for He is our life, righteousness, light, purification, and armor.

I call you today to this struggle against sin. It is identical to the practice of the living communion with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.

Do not go astray, for without Christ no man is able to conquer the evil enemy that has a power from God over mind, heart, and flesh. You will not find Christ outside your closed room, nightly vigils, and commended fasting.

Concerning fasting, you must realize that as soon as the monk dons the cross he is named a member of those who are clad with the cross, whose only work is to carry the cross well, in total patience and forbearance, praising Him constantly day and night. Away from fasting you will not find the strength to bear the cross.

As for the monk who is getting on in years, it is good for him to fast till sunset, identified as true asceticism, and there are those who fast till twilight, each in accordance to his ability.

It is known that the early monks did not admit breaking fasts in any respect, for their lives were all fasting. When lent, the holy forty days of fasting, arrived they left the congregation completely and went to worship in the wilderness for that period, following terrific fasts, devoid of bell ringing, meeting, or attendance of mass.

The wilderness of St. Macarius (in its early days) had no churches at all. Every few months the fathers went in groups to Nitria (near Damanhour) to attend Church and partake of the flesh and blood, then return to Sheheet. Saint Macarius went to St. Antony to ask his advice (at the end of St Antony days), whether to build a church in the wilderness of Sheheet. It was due to the hardship of traveling to Nitria, and so was advised to build a church wherein to take Holy Communion. Holy Communion was only on Sundays, as the fathers arrived on Saturday, fasting

till evening, partook of the flesh and blood, and spent Sunday night awake listening to the young monks' questions and the elders' answers. In the morning each monk went to his cave. This was the beginning of monastic life and all the changes that have happened are in reconciliation to laity.

I do not mention this history to call for change or amendment, but to make you understand the origin of worship: how it was fundamentally based on prayer and Holy Communion only on Sunday. It is to draw your attention to the value of prayer in a monk's cell. Please consider the cell the center for worship, prayer, and praise to Christ in unrestraint, joy, glorification, tears, and fasting.

I will now return, once more, to the basis of our relationship with God the Father and with Jesus Christ since the very beginning, for us to be convinced, believe, and live in communion with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ intrepidly and confidently, in worship with open heart and clear conscience. Even if we struggle in prayer we know, for sure, that the Father loves us, and that Christ answers all our invocations and requests because He, "by the power at work within us, is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think" (Eph 3:20). Amen.