

The Monastery of St Macarius

Scetis

# The Aim of The Christian Life



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*The Spiritual Father of the Monastery of St Macarius*

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"غاية الحياة المسيحية" (بالإنجليزية)  
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*The Spiritual Father of the Monastery of St Macarius*

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# THE AIM OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

EVER SINCE GOD CREATED MAN, he has lived two kinds of life, a personal life within himself, which we may call the life of seclusion, where he withdraws into his soul and converses with his Creator, drawn to Him in obedience, and a public life directed towards others, where he deals with all kinds of people, friends and enemies, kinsmen and adversaries, family and church and all the members of the society in which he participates. We should notice that the elements in each of these two types of life are not supplementary to man's creation but are inherent in it and in its instinctive and inbred qualities.

## *First: Withdrawal into the soul and intercourse with God (the life of seclusion):*

Withdrawal into the soul and intercourse with God in man's personal life cannot be fabricated or induced, but can only occur in response to the impulse generated by the fundamental relationship that draws the soul to the source of its existence and the origin of its creation. For man is indeed created in the image of God and the image inclines to the original. In its constant suppressed yearning for God it tries to change and become like its creator, responding to a hidden voice always calling it on to higher things and calling it to account when it falls. This gives the soul a true sense of purpose in which it finds gladness even though it may fail to attain its perfect fulfillment. When it loses this aim, or gives it up, or neglects it, the soul finds itself in abject misery, which it may sense and

understand, or through which it may live without perceiving its cause. God is the source of the soul's true happiness, but a source that has no outward manifestations. The soul may sense Him but be unable to speak of Him articulately, may be touched by Him and yet not know Him.

So the development of the personal life, that is the life of seclusion and withdrawal into inner silence to approach God, is one of life's true aims and is indeed one of the purposes of man's very creation, which took place so that man might live with God and share eternal life with Him.

The purpose of the creation of man is that he should live with God, and he did indeed begin in this way. Adam, and then Adam and Eve together, lived with God and in His presence, hearing Him, obeying Him and doing His will. Man forfeited this life, but even so it remains inherent in him, for he forfeited it in time but the potential for it remained in his being. If we study the Bible in the light of this fact, we find that all the events it describes, and the commandments and instruction it gives, as they develop from man's first dealings with God, can be summed up as teaching to show man how to live with God. "Walk before me and be blameless" (Gen 17:1). "My son, give me your heart, and let your eyes observe my ways" (Prov 23:26). But when man broke down and failed completely to keep his grasp on life with God, Christ came to remove all the obstacles and impediments that stood in the way, offering Himself as an intermediary between mankind and God, through His blood, and through His person too. He restored to man, with a guarantee established by a covenant in blood, his supreme purpose, that is eternal life with God as the highest calling in life. Then we acquired the Holy Spirit to teach and train us, if we submit to Him.

*The ability to live a life with God exists deep in man's created nature*

But the life with God is a very special kind of life; a particular type of behavior is required in his presence, and the senses we must acquire to hear his voice, heed his warnings and perceive his works and activity are very precise and very special. In short, the way of God demands of him who would walk in it a certain sensitivity and discernment not at all like those by which we live in the life of this world.

All these special qualities and particular kinds of ability exist hidden in man in embryo, as it were. They are not totally alien to human nature, which God originally created to hear Him and respond, to live in his presence and find delight in his goodness. Nevertheless there is a vast difference between the worldly and the spiritual senses. To illustrate this we may consider the experiments which have taken man beyond the earth's gravitational field and into the weightlessness of space, where man's body weight is nil. Anyone who participates in these experiments only does so after passing certain tests and undergoing exhaustive and demanding exercises of numerous kinds to prepare him to live in the weightless state. Just so is the transition from the life based on the physical senses to the life of the spirit. The former is characterized by a love of amusement and merrymaking, a deep involvement with and commitment to material things, a concern for one's own earthly pleasure, an unreasonable attachment to friends and family, and the tendency to be moved to be moved to anger, malice, enmity, greed, viciousness and cruelty towards ones opponents, enemies and adversaries. The latter is characterized by silence and a turning to God to hear Him, converse with Him, incline to Him, love Him, yearn for Him and respond to his voice, which one perceives by a special sense of hearing. In short, anyone who

chooses to live his life with God must completely conform to the conditions of that life.

***The abilities one must acquire to live one's life with God are the inner senses of the spirit***

Spiritual people and all who have devoted themselves to the life of the spirit and the love of Christ, choosing eternal life and preferring it to the life of this age, voluntarily submitting to the way that makes eternal life victorious, have described their life as "being open to God." That is, an opening up of all the senses, and what is beyond the senses, so that they acquire new and different senses, to which Christ clearly referred when He said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear" (Mk 4:8). For everyone has ears with which to hear, but Christ is here asking for ears that can hear his secret voice that summons men to eternal life. Elsewhere He mourns the fate of those who have lost the ability to hear, see and understand spiritually, and try to make do with the earthly senses by which subhuman creatures live: "Seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand" (Mt 13:13). It is here perfectly clear that Christ is speaking of inner sight, inner hearing and inner understanding which perceive the invitation God addresses to the heart of every man, calling to each one in a special way.

These are the inner senses of the spirit by which one understands and perceives the ways of eternal life and which bring about a radical change in the way one lives his earthly life, bringing it into subservience to the Kingdom of God. The neglect of these senses earns the reproach of Christ and the warning that it may lead to man's failure to attain his highest purpose in life: "For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are heavy of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should perceive with their eyes, and hear with their

ears, and understand with their heart, and turn for me to heal them" (Mt 13:15). Christ is here referring to man's deliberately blocking and disregarding the spiritual means by which God's voice may reach the heart of man, obstinately resisting, denying, doubting, rejecting and despising them. We infer too from his words that God persists in trying to make man hear his voice, appealing not to one of his senses alone or approaching him in one way only, but attempting to communicate in many ways, through the spiritual heart, ear and eye of man. These indicate the many faculties God has given to man, to every man, by which he may hear his voice and respond to his very personal invitation to live with Him, to submit, repent, change, turn back and live.

These words of Christ describe and portray a quite different life from that which the natural man lives. The senses must be trained for it and be taught to understand its secrets and its demands. It comes slowly and develops by stages just as man's physical stature increases little by little, but at every stage along the way a sure sign is given to assure the soul, and the sign cannot be mistaken unless there is an obstinate refusal to see it and a conscious resistance to the spirit.

### *The life of spiritual seclusion is intended for everyone without exception*

It must be made very clear here that when we speak of the life of seclusion, or the private life or the inner life alone with God, we are not referring to the celibate life or the life of the solitary. The life of spiritual seclusion and setting one's soul apart with God is to be found in every man, and is vital to every man, and is one of the great aims of the life of every man, whether he be celibate or married, a monk, a hermit or an ascetic.

***Second: The life of co-operation with others***  
[and this does not negate the inner life]

God Himself did not restrict the life of spiritual seclusion to the natural life of the individual, but clearly extended it further when He said, “It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him” (Gen 2:18). That is to say that man’s spiritual purpose goes beyond the natural purpose of his body. The natural aim of human life is co-operation in all its forms, whether in procreation, expending energy in work, enduring difficulties, discovering the unknown or facing danger. This natural aim does not stand in the way of our grasping opportunities to make time for the life of spiritual seclusion and withdrawal with God, which is man’s higher and more important and more enduring aim.

We may note that in the creation of man the life of co-operation came after the life of seclusion, and when the Bible speaks of it, it does not do so to negate the life of spiritual withdrawal, for we do not find an absolute repudiation, but rather the gentler phrase, “it is not good.” In other words we may say that the individual finds his higher spiritual purpose in his own private life with God, which is vital and necessary, both for life itself and as a major source of strength to creation, so that man may live with God from beginning to end, while the life of co-operation with others enriches the earthly life and makes its essential tasks easier. The inner life is thus eternal, the life of co-operation temporal.

***Man’s relationship with others has a spiritual aim and purpose***

An important point to clarify, and one of the reasons for which this article is written, is that the community life of man, that is his relationship with others, has a spiritual aim and purpose in every way as important as the aim and purpose man

sets before himself in his personal life of seclusion with God. The life of seclusion in which man turns aside to be alone with God is a preparation for and initiation into the eternal life he will live with God, and the absence, neglect or loss of this inner life amounts to the loss of eternal life. But it is also true to say that the spiritual life in which man co-operates with the community, or in other words man's spiritual relationship with others, is an incarnation of the Kingdom of God in time and on this earth, and to neglect, dismiss or reject it amounts to obstructing the appearing of the Kingdom of God, and openly and consciously resisting the execution of his command that his rule should be revealed for the benefit of mankind. This is the Kingdom we cry out for every day and in every prayer: "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Mt 6:10).

### ***The relationship between the personal life and the public life***

It is clear that there is a deep relationship between the primary aim of the Christian life, which is to prepare for eternal life with God, and the second aim which is to fulfill God's command to incarnate his kingdom and reveal his ruling power. The sublime spiritual values that the individual acquires by the opening up of his spiritual consciousness in his personal relationship with God, are complemented, used and put into practice in his relationship with others.

For example, in our personal relationship with God we may acquire a sense of pure love and truly experience the essence of this powerful divine attribute, that knocks the self off balance and makes it let go of its own being as the divine love overwhelms everything. This sense will then be put to work in our relationships with others, not simply out of obedience to the command to love, but irresistibly and spontaneously, hardly

discriminating where love is given, for this is a love quite unrelated to this world's reality or the worthiness of the beloved. The soul that loves in this way may even love its opponent, for it loves without expecting anything in return, and so loves freely and generously even to the abandonment of its self. The love that is acquired from God overcomes all obstacles. It even overcomes enmity with but light effort, for the self that is in submission to God is quickly moved to carry out the injunction: "Love your enemies, bless those who curse you and pray for those who persecute you" (Mt 5:44, Lk 6:27, 28), feeling that the sense of the verse flows in the heart and mind and body. The soul of such a man responds willingly and joyfully even beyond reason, and it may appear to some that he is crazed.

***The divine love permeates both kinds of life, uniting their aims and perfecting the divine plan for the creation and salvation***

In the situation we have described, the essence of the divine love has flowed through the soul, satisfying it and filling it with joy, and in so doing has established in man two spiritual operations which lead to the fulfillment of two basic spiritual purposes, one concerning the individual's life with God and the other concerning the Kingdom of God. The first spiritual life, that is the personal life of seclusion with God, led to a correct practical spiritual life with people. In this way the inner spiritual qualities peculiar to one individual complement other spiritual qualities peculiar to other people, and this takes place with no difficulty, for the essence of the qualities is one.

In short we may say that man has a supreme spiritual aim in his life, which is to live with God. He begins to carry it out individually and personally, each in his own way, until he acquires a personal inner life with spiritual qualities particular

to his own eternal life. This inevitably leads to clear action or actions in relation to others. These in themselves constitute another aim in life which concerns God Himself, for He is working towards the realization of his Kingdom in time on this earth. The working out of these two aims brings to fulfillment the life of man, the work of God and his plan for the creation and salvation.

***Life with only one of these two purposes is impossible***

The spiritual man cannot live with only one of these two purposes. If he acquires through his meditations, prayers and retreats essential attributes, such as love, mercy and the fear of God, along with kindness, friendliness, and joy of spirit, depth of vision and a clear perception of the directions of God, he cannot then bear to live shut in within himself, a prisoner of his own selfishness, heedless of the groans of others, unsympathetic, unforgiving, insensitive to those who suffer, blind to those in need, unable to bear hardship cheerfully or to overcome hostility with love. The first qualities are those that grow from a life lived with God, and they are also a practical fulfillment of the commandments of his Kingdom and a declaration of his authority and wisdom. The man of the spirit puts the qualities of the spirit to work to serve the spirit in his dealings with others, no matter who the others may be, friends or enemies. The love that is acquired from God has no self interest and seeks no reward, nor can it be hindered from running its course to the end, nor can any encouragement increase it or win its greater favor, for the divine love is given to all who need it, and the enemy, the wrathful, the cruel, the unbeliever, the traitor, the wicked, are among those who need it most.

\* \* \*

### ***Our spiritual reality in relation to these two purposes***

These are sweet words, but the reality is as bitter as gall and wormwood. Most of us live for neither the first aim nor the second, and might almost exclude ourselves from all that has been said. The ears that hear and the eyes that see and the hearts that understand, as Christ described them (Mt 13:13) exist no more, and all the senses are enthusiastic, energetic and skillful in serving the needs of this age, the concerns of the body and the delights of the self, unaware that the spirit too has senses or that God has things to say. And even if the soul admits to the existence of the spiritual life and receives instruction and hears sermons such as this, it in fact neither hears nor acts.

Most of us spend our days carelessly, and when night comes it is simply a break from work, and that is all. We let it pass in any way it will, as circumstances dictate or as we decide, and no longer in any time or place made for eternal life, either by day or by night. The soul hates to withdraw alone with itself, and flees from doing so lest its pitiful condition be exposed. As for listening to God, it is impossible, for the spiritual ear has grown deaf and can no longer hear anything but the shrill cries of the world with its cares and pleasures. We are manipulated by events and we stand unmoved. The manners we have inherited from those who have gone before us are the manners we use in our dealings with people. The commandments of God go no further than our tongue—we speak of them but do not act on them. The basic fundamentals of eternal life are lost to us and we have wandered willingly out of the Kingdom of God.

Where do we stand in relation to the path trodden by spiritual men and the aims of the perfect life? Where and when did we lose the vision of God and his Kingdom, for whose sake we should be living and laboring in gladness together? But however much we imagine that we have lost sight of the aims

of the spiritual life, or that they have deserted us, we try in vain to deceive ourselves and God, for they are inseparably part of our flesh and our bones and have burrowed their way into our minds. Our very nature was formed to live with God and commune with Him, and we were born of God to do his will. We must go to face our deepest being before it turns to face us and makes us pay what we owe, for we are responsible for the Kingdom of God and we have to settle the account of our stewardship (Lk 16:2). We are laden with talents and gifts which are latent within us, but we do not do business with them or even know them, and every day that passes without our doing good or carrying out a commandment is counted against us as a day wasted, and we are counted as base hinderers of the appearing of the Kingdom of God.

\* \* \*

Once more I repeat so that you may take heed:

Every man in Christ has received Christ as Redeemer and Savior, and is counted among the children of the Kingdom. He has received adoption, no matter what his stature or his circumstances. Two purposes are apportioned to him for they are inherent in his very creation. They are guaranteed by the work of the blood of Christ and the protection of the Holy Spirit, and are ready to be acted upon day and night, at every hour, at every step, in every word, if we only submit to the Spirit.

**The first purpose:** is that man should live with God day by day and hour by hour. He is officially called to this, and his name is among the list of guests invited to the banquet to draw near to the Lord and hear a word from Him. But he must approach with a new ear, and eye, and heart, and mind. He is

called to be someone special to God, if he does not refuse the invitation, whether in moments of peace and inner stillness or in the midst of the din of work. This is his calling.

He is called, in the first instance, when he goes to his room, to maintain his personal intercourse with the Beloved when there is no one to see. These are blessed times when his inner senses are opened to see and hear and perceive the things of the new life with God, things he had neither heard, nor seen, nor understood before. His consciousness is stirred, his thinking is changed, his will is renewed, he is encouraged on his way and his life becomes joyful. These are the moments when he learns how to be changed every day, and even every hour and on every occasion, to be conformed to the heart and will of God. Then he is counted a good citizen of heaven and a co-heir of God with Christ. Having the confidence of a son he speaks to God knowing that even though he is sinful, no sin is held against him. Confession to the Lord and the work of the blood of Christ are both guarantees of this, according to the words of St John the Apostle: "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness... and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin" (1 Jn 1:9, 7). The Holy Spirit teaches him the way of purity and righteousness and the joy of holiness and sanctity, and saves his body from the mastery of Satan, loosing the bonds of the old debts that had accumulated against him.

**The second purpose:** is also inherent in his being, latent in the essence of his new creation, disseminated throughout the inherited characteristics of the cells of his mind and body, and in the breathings of his spirit and the movement of his consciousness, whether he wills it or not. It is that he should be a worker for and witness to the Kingdom of our Lord, as a son entrusted with his father's estate, declaring the bequest he has

received in his spirit and repeating the message he has heard with his ears, his consciousness, his heart and his spirit. He declares and repeats it to every man, in action not in words, in deeds not in sermons.

That is to say, the second purpose assigned, or rather granted to man, is that he should make the Kingdom of God incarnate and work towards its perfection and clear revelation to every man. He is to do this by loving, by loving with all his heart, with a love like the love with which the Lord Jesus Christ loved us, and in which He offered his life for sinners. He is to love without regard for whom he loves or even why he loves. He is to love without allowing anything to hinder him, whether it be a name, a religion, a doctrine or the enmity of his enemy. He is to love in order to keep the commandment, to build the Kingdom of our Lord and declare its fulfillment in the fullness of time on this earth, and he is to put into practice on a spiritual level all the commandments—kindness and bowels of mercy, friendship and unrestrained forgiveness, and self-sacrifice to the point of death, not that he should be praised but that he should glorify God and bear witness to his righteousness.

This fulfillment of the Kingdom of God has been granted to you and also laid upon you, and it is your responsibility to bear witness to the existence of God and his righteousness in the darkness that comes before the dawn, in the ordeal of injustice, in the furnace of enmity and hatred. It is there that love must be raised to fly as the standard of the Kingdom of God.

Finally I say once more, it is not up to us to choose or refuse these aims. They are intrinsic to life and we have received them deeply embedded in our creation, they are latent in our being, ready to be set in motion at any moment and bring support beyond our understanding or imagining. We shall be called to

account for our response to them, not only at the end of time, but from this moment on and at all times, for any resignation from our calling to carry them out and work towards them, immediately puts us in a position contrary to the will of God, and against the on-going current of the Holy Spirit inherent in our creation. It is then as if we had become our own enemies, the enemies of our own life, and life becomes a burden to us without our realizing that the responsibility for its heaviness and the resistance and friction we feel, lies with us. We stand against the current of life instead of moving with it, and so we lose the sense of life including that most precious thing—to be with God and bear witness to Him. And so we lose our life itself, for we empty it of its essence and bring it up short of attaining its aims. A life like this has no meaning and so becomes intolerable.





Ever since God Created man he has lived two kinds of life, a personal life within himself, which we may call the life of seclusion, where he without any harm to his soul and body respects his Creator, obeys him in obedience and a public life, directed towards others, where he deals with all the people, friends and enemies, Christians and heretics, learned and unlearned, rich and poor, the society in which he now abides. We see that the former life is the chief of his life, the latter is secondary, but it is also important.

