The Last Dialogue of St. Macarius the Great



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In 2021 the inmates of the Monastery of St. Macarius the Great in the Nitrian Desert under the Egyptian Coptic Church made a remarkable discovery. During the study and digitalization of the manuscripts kept in the monastery's library there came to light two ancient manuscripts written in the Coptic language which are catalogued in the library as manuscript no.383 and manuscript 384.

These are two parts of a single work of text written approximately 1630 years ago, which means that they coincide with the year 391 – according to tradition, the time of the demise of the first abbot of the monastery and one of the founders of Egyptian monasticism, St. Macarius the Great.

A textological analysis carried out by specialists at the Institute for Coptic Research in Cairo has shown that these manuscripts are none other than the last spiritual exhortation in his life of St. Macarius and written down by his disciples. For this reason, the text has been titled The Last Dialogue of St. Macarius the Great, which in the present context means the conversation and appeal of the saint to his disciples.

With the blessing of the Coptic Patriarch Tawadros II as part of the work of the commission for dialogue

between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Coptic Church a translation of the memorial was made into Russian with the corresponding literary editing. This is the first ever edition of the present work.

Copies of the original and limited print-run of the book were brought to Russia by the delegation of abbots and inmates of the monasteries of the Coptic Church during their visit between 23rd August and 1st September 2021.



Monks of the Monastery of St. Macarius the Great make digital copies of the manuscript

Coptic Patriarch Tawadros II

The work published below, which in essence is a short exposition of the foundations of the godly life of Christian, is striking in its simplicity and at the same in the depths of its thought, it contains spiritual advice that has never lost its relevance and will be of undoubted interest for a broad audience of readers.

The Last Dialogue of St. Macarius the Great

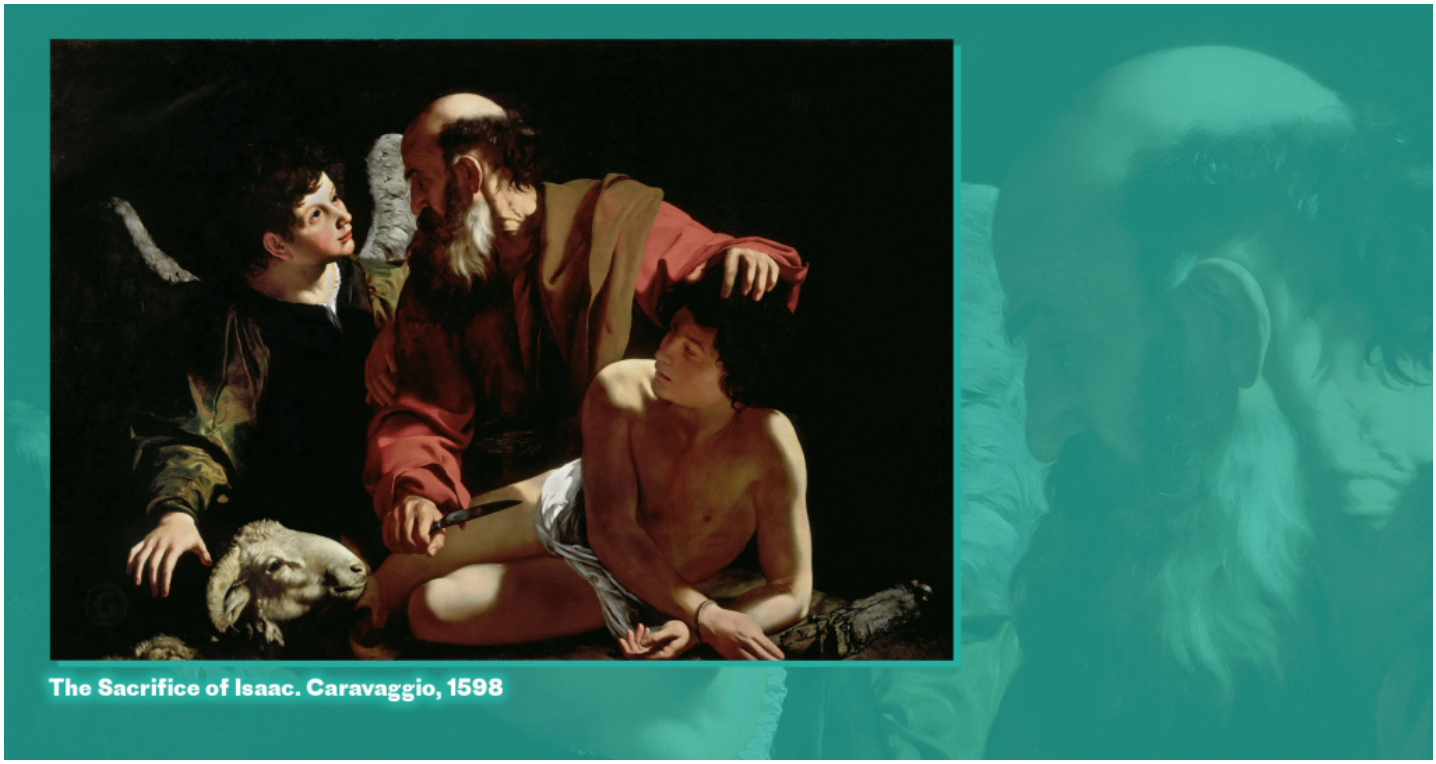
One day the elders of the mount of Nitria invited the venerable Macarius to come and see them: “Come and visit us, we want to see you before you depart to the Lord.” When he came all the brothers gathered together. And the monks beseeched him: “Speak a word to us, father.”

And he said: “O beloved children, let us give glory to the saints. We must be zealous for the feats of the saints, for their way of life, for the way they have been made worth of the blessedness of the kingdom of heaven. For they did not purchase it with money; rather, they did so by imitating the feats of the saints

that went before them. They acquired poverty, humility of soul, a contrite heart in prayers, love for all people and the fear of God which never left their hearts and which they used to drive out all fear. These are the virtues of the soul.

They rejected all bodily lusts, they went hungry and experienced thirst, they did not rejoice in anything worldly. In spiritual feats they attained glory and received the crown of the kingdom of heaven. They abandoned all the lusts of their heart for the Lord and took up their cross and followed him, and nothing separated them from his love.

We do not have the perfect and complete love of God that our holy fathers had. Those who sincerely love God with a pure love which holds not deceit or hypocrisy can never be separated from the love of God either by children, wife, brother, family, gold or power. As Abraham, who sincerely loved God, did not spare his son Isaac when God commanded him to sacrifice him but who obeyed him and did that which was commanded to him. And like the holy martyrs who preferred the love of God to temporal life and patiently endured suffering in shedding their blood. It was from the love of God that they had that they fulfilled the words of the apostle Paul: 'Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? … For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus or Lord' (Rom 8.35, 38-39).


The Sacrifice of Isaac. Caravaggio, 1598

My children, this is now an integral part of our life. In despising love of the world and in serving and

following the Lord Jesus Christ we are to love him all the more than our parents, brothers, children and all others so that we observe the commandments and adhere to the virtues by imitating the piety of our ancestors.

My children, flee sin and be patient unto death in observing the commandments of the Lord. Heed not the insinuations of the enemy [of the human race] that encourage us to violate the divine will, no matter how small a commandment it may be. For the violation of any commandment will evoke the wrath of God.

I want you to be, my children, temples of the living God within you (cf. 1 Cor. 6.19). To always love your neighbour and lest there be among you anyone who harbours evil and hatred against his brother, for the heart which contemplates evil and hatred cannot ever be a dwelling-place for God. You know that if you love one another, then God will abide among you (cf. Jn 14.35). Love one another, then, so that you may acquire for yourself all the qualities of the other virtues of your monastic rank throughout all the days of your life.

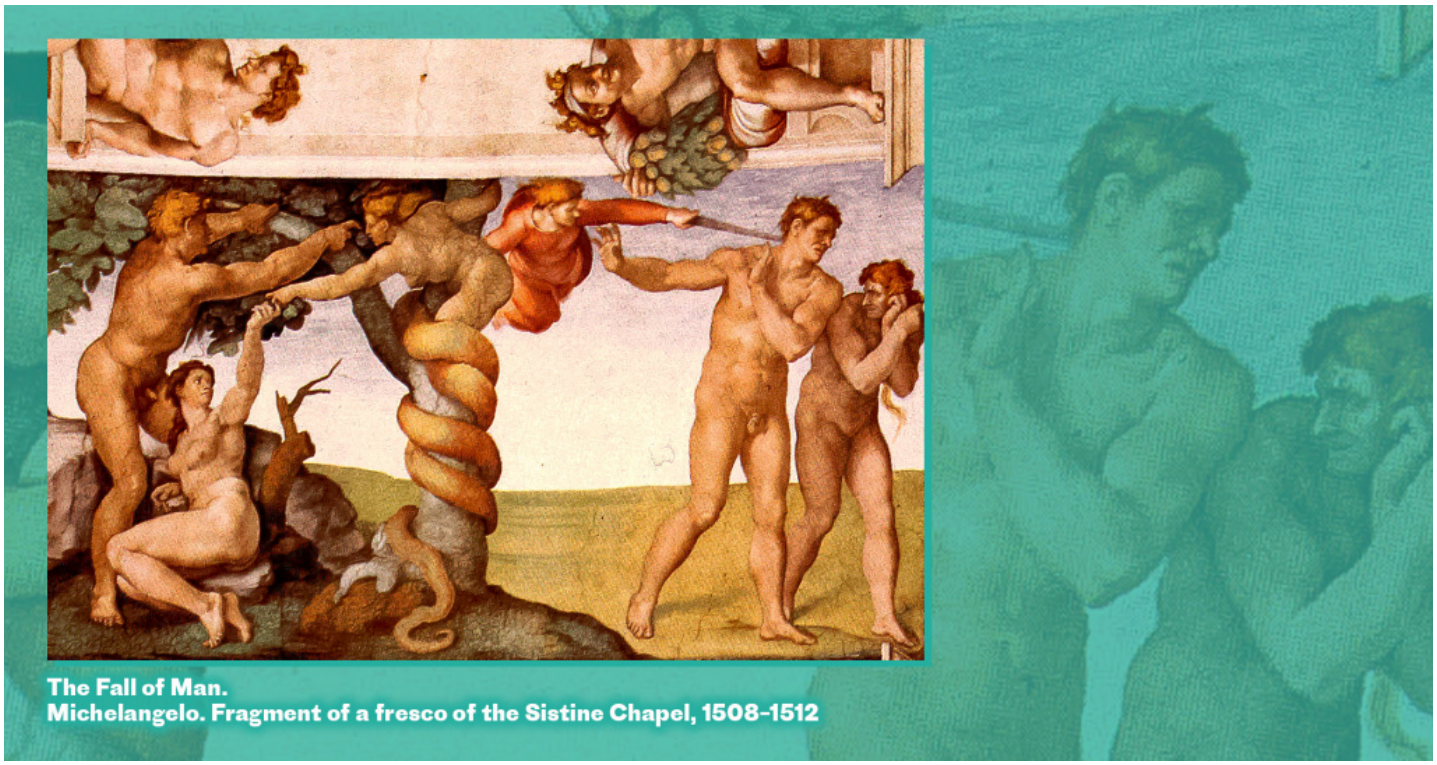
Cast away from your face the veil of darkness which hinders you from seeing the sweetness [of life in Christ]. Have love for your neighbour and know the dignity of this virtue. Listen to the apostle Paul when he says to you that 'you are the temple of the living God' (2 Cor 6.16). May you keep this in your hearts and never judge your neighbour, never cause him grief lest he anger God who dwells within him. For all the honour with which we revere our brother is honour which is brought to Christ, and may glory be given to him!



Saint Paul Writing His Epistles.
Valentin de Boulogne, 1618-1620

In the same way, give reverence to the beggar and those who endure all need, for the Lord teaches: ‘Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me’ (Matt 25.40). I beseech you to flee from those who sow division and condemnation and who bring destruction to your soul. The soul which accepts no division, which rejects the love of money and the lusts of the world, shines forth like the sun, for it is liberated from sin. Yet if it is overcome by the striving to judge and sow division, to fall into envy and love of gain and commit other evil deeds, it is then that grace recedes.

You know that if a wise man once falls into the pit, he will do all that is possible not to fall into it again. You know too that as the serpent can be the vessel for the actions of the evil one and through him Adam fell and tasted of death, so too evil deeds are the gates of the enemy at which the soul of the ascetic perishes. So, take care lest you become the dwelling-place of Satan.



The Fall of Man.
Michelangelo. Fragment of a fresco of the Sistine Chapel, 1508-1512

My children, guard your ears so that your hearts remain pure and flee from all impurity, for there are many wolves who thirst to kill the innocent sheep.

And if any of you commits an error and wounds the heart of his brother through a evil word or sows division, then he should swiftly repent and in future no longer return to this lest he kindle the flame [of passion]. And if anyone hears his brother being judged, then he is to justify his brother so that peace and love be among them, and it is then that the words of our Saviour shall bring forth within you good

fruit: Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God the Most High (cf. Matt 5.9).

And then know, my children, that there is truly within the human heart the divine mystery. When the heart is impure and its intentions are impure in relation to its neighbour, then the heart feels this impurity no matter how well it is concealed.

The same is true of love. If your brother's heart loves you, you feel this in the same way as you feel your reciprocal love towards him. So, be delicate of soul and pure of heart.

If anyone is indignant at the words of his brother and does not verify whether they are false or true, then he should not conceal this indignation within his heart, but rather speak good words to him, inwardly withholding his anger. An impure heart generates rigid hatred and stirs up the wrath of God. For this reason, if anyone hears words of his brother that trouble his heart, then he must directly make a remark on these words of his. For if we do not act in this manner, then hatred is gestated gradually within us, leading to death in both this present life and in the age to come.

My children, all those who experience affliction yet do not accept it or who are not reconciled to it will perish [in eternal life]. Torments will await him and he will become bitter, sad, despondent and disturbed. Spiritual labour is like the royal way which day and night is watched over by guards. He who chooses this path and adheres to it without departing will abide in peace. He who is not diligent, who is vain and does not have obedience has chosen for himself the arduous and exhausting path. Everyone who follows it will become exhausted and may perish, for it is guarded by robbers. For this reason, he who has abandoned the royal path by having fallen into temptation – let him be raised up again and be corrected. Yet for the one who has rejected the royal path completely and willingly chosen another there can be neither justification, nor healing.

From the depths of my heart, I beseech you: 'Do not let the sun go down on your anger' (Eph 4.26). Let none of you depart for sleep having evil in your heart against your brother. For what will be his fate if death visits him that night? He will depart to the Lord with a heart defiled and impure thoughts, he will lose the fruits of his labours, peace [of soul] and the life to come [with Christ].

My children, it is my desire that you increase ministry to the saints and the infirm and do even more good to them. Know that any feat of any of you will be accounted for good, whether it be ministry, prayer, prostrations, tears or fasting. Even a single word which a man utters with love of God or any manifestation of virtue will be of benefit to you. Be not afraid, my children, for our Saviour in no wise wishes you evil and every good deed of ours is revealed to him when the hour comes for our soul to depart the body.

My beloved, be not like those who eat, drink and sleep without measure, but like those who labour and with humility accept all things for the Lord's sake. For this reason, fulfill the tasks that have been set you with diligence and come to love hardships. Let bodily tiredness be a joy and comfort to you. Never be sad as a result of it and labour not according to compulsion but of a free will.

Let the one who strives to accomplish spiritual deeds do this with a joyful heart and without idleness. Blessed is he who always labours with joy in his heart, for the doors of Paradise will be opened unto him.



He who succumbs to the frailties of the body will become a stranger to the seeds of virtues prepared for those who labour for spiritual deeds sincerely. The one who has no faith in the resurrection [of all] is incapable of receiving heavenly gifts as he has nothing within himself save sadness and infinite darkness.

What use is it to a man if for a short while he finds comfort in this world through eating, drinking and excessive luxury, and then perishes in eternal torments (cf. Lk 12.16-21)?

He who acquires but one virtue and abandons the others is like the man who takes up a vessel for his journey containing oil and yet having a hole in it. The purpose of his journey becomes unattainable, for no oil will remain in the vessel. So, he who observes but one commandment yet rejects all the others will

labour in vain.

Remain vigilant so idleness never overtakes you. Do not be tempted by false dreams lest you become like the one who gives alms and, in being idle, thinks that he is no longer obligated to fulfill the other commandments. Or the other who thinks that he will be saved merely because he has fed someone, shown hospitality to someone, has visited the sick or the prisoner, but at the same time has neglected all the other commandments. Or the one who prays day and night while at the same time he does not have love or mercy and has broken all the other commandments. Do not be like the one who fasts unceasingly and deprives himself of all earthly good things while not labouring in the other commandments. Or like the one who merely from idleness strives for abstinence and poverty, believing that by his chastity and non-acquisitiveness he will be saved. Or the one who, while having physical purity, does not abandon evil thoughts, dissension and envy and believes that his bodily purity has already attained the kingdom of heaven.

Thus, he who observes only some commandments will hardly find salvation through them, for the commandments are like a chain: only one link has to fall out for the whole chain to collapse. Anyone who neglects but one of the commandments will lose all the fruits of his labours!

My children, recall these words of mine, receive them and keep them in your hearts, for the time will come when the Lord will demand of each of us the fruits of my words and you will affirm what you have heard from me. Do not make my words a reason for condemnation since all of this is merely for the sake of your salvation and benefit.

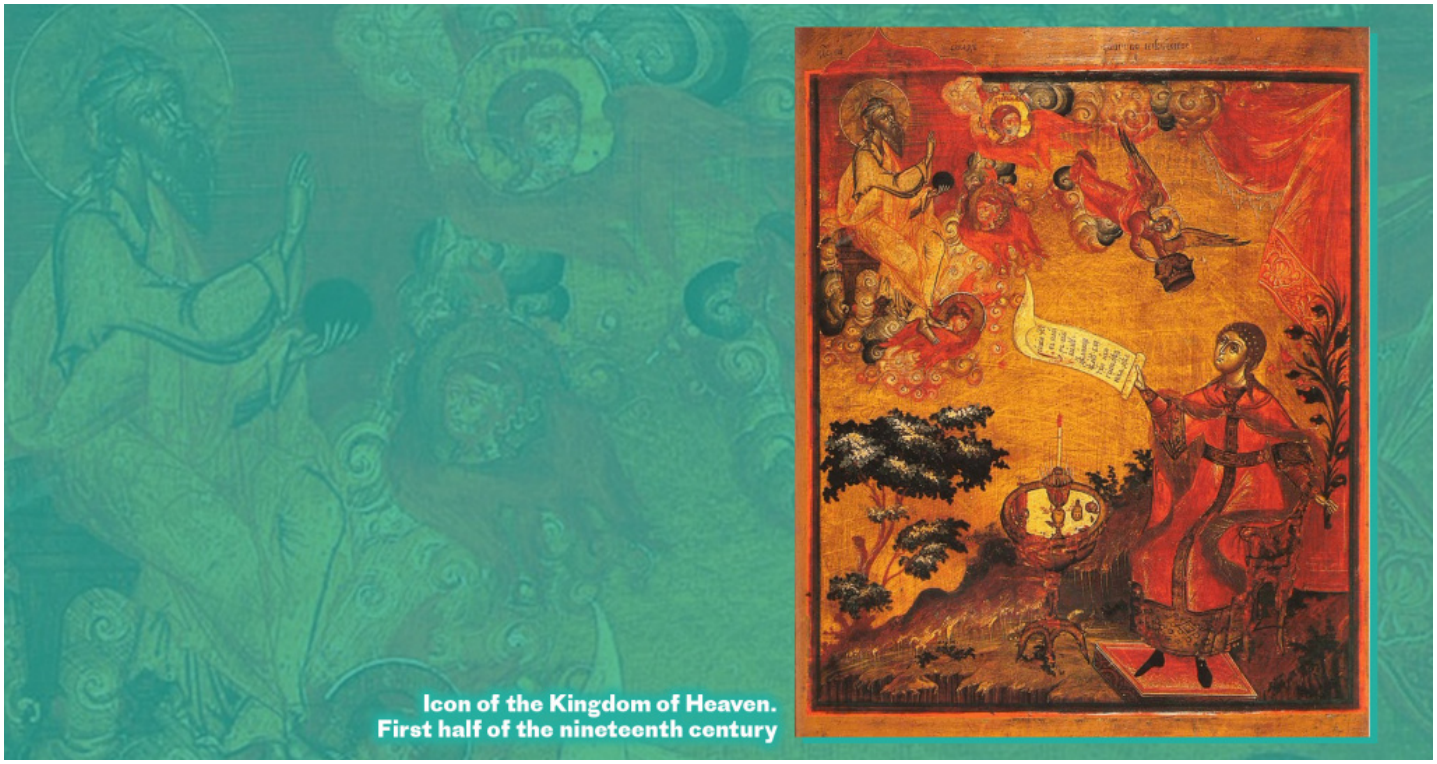
Take care, my children, for the salvation of your souls and turn to the Lord with pure repentance, without falsehood, with lamentation and prayer.

Recognize your frailties and do not be like those who are possessed neither of reason nor simple wisdom, who, having once fallen into the pit, return to it again and again. And know that each of you has been offered the opportunity to repent and repentance will reveal all virtues to those who seek them. For as repentance is a great affair, so too is its eternal and blessed outcome great. And he who labours in repentance with all striving of the heart to do so will receive for this a great reward and will reach the kingdom of heaven.

Pure repentance, the confessing of one’s sins, both bodily and of the soul, is the key to all virtues and the beginning of all righteousness. He who finds it lays the way towards the fulfilling of the commandments and is likened to the faithful man who has begun to build his house on stone (cf. Matt 7.24-25).

My children, I pray to the Lord who cares for you that will not let cunning temptation and coldness creep into you as a result of the inattentiveness of your hearts, for this this leads away from repentance and then to the deprivation of repentance. While you still live in the body, adhere steadfastly to repentance and never let it slip away from you.

Recall that all those who reject repentance and mercy drive away from themselves the kingdom of heaven.



Icon of the Kingdom of Heaven.
First half of the nineteenth century

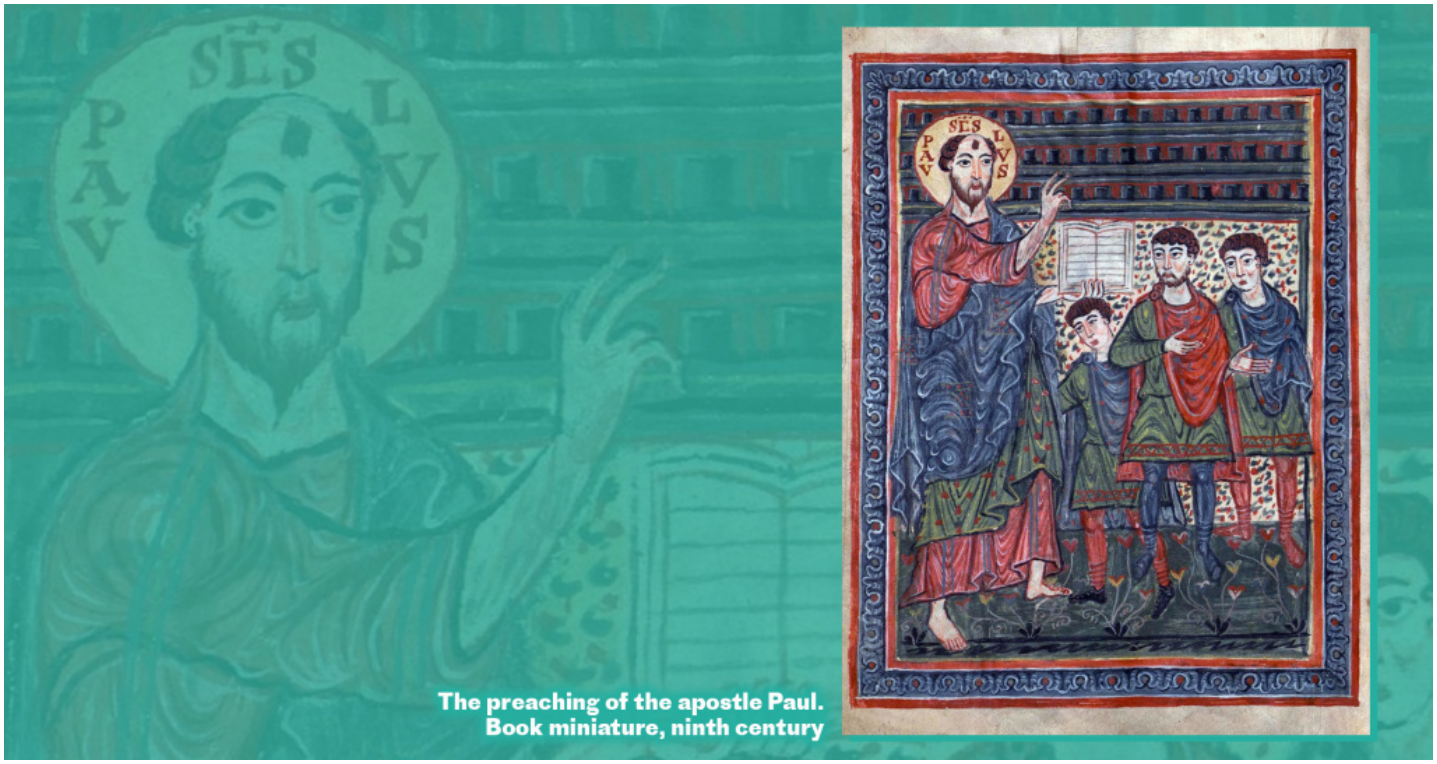
Always abide in prayer and lamentation before our Saviour so that each of you be vouchsafed to hear his voice saying: 'Your sins are forgiven you' (Mk 2.5). Our Saviour is Good and loves mankind, he rejoices in our repentance and intercedes for us before his heavenly Father. Yet try not the goodness of his heart by falling into sin, for then prayerful intercession for you will be in vain.

Is there anything more unworthy than when we abandon prayer and give ourselves over to weakness and lack of watchfulness in trampling down the fruits of the spirit that have been sent down for our great endeavours and tears? Thus, love and labour for the Lord, for humility and diligence bring us true comfort, they heal all the infirmities of our heart and grant to us great mercies, and then, finally, we will be vouchsafed to become a dwelling-place of the Holy Spirit.

Let us then repent while there is still time for repentance. This hour is not long and we should learn how to pass it profitably before we are called upon to abandon this infirm body. The Lord will not accept even the good deeds of the one who ended his life in sins and without repentance. Let us heed this so that we

should find comfort in times of affliction. The idle farmer who does not sow or reap will have nothing to fill his grain stores with.

Indeed, this is all truly so, and for this reason let each of us labour according to his strength and let each receive his crown given by God's mercy according to his virtues. I beseech you, my beloved, do not burden yourselves with the cares of this world and do not be like the idle servant who buried the talent given to him by his master without having laboured in the least (cf. Matt 25.14-30).



The preaching of the apostle Paul.
Book miniature, ninth century

We labour according to the strength we have been given, yet he who renders to our good and merciful God the least sacrifice will never lose his reward.

Let us, then, always strive to emulate the righteous as we contemplate them in great glory and with great diligence prepare ourselves for our end so that we inherit the same grace that they possess.

My children, labour now with all your strength, pondering the glory that will crown your labours. Take care that you are never deprived of grace. The apostle Paul says in his epistle: 'To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life' (Rom 8.6). So let, then, our mind be spiritual so that we may live eternally by having inherited blessedness.

My children, I give to each one of you the commandment not to approach the sacred mysteries [of the Church] without having being reconciled to each other beforehand. If anyone is offended with his brother, then hasten to make peace with him in asking forgiveness and prostrating yourself to the

ground, and only then approach the mysteries. Know that love between brothers and mutual reconciliation of their hearts is a blessing which contains the fullness of grace.

Wrath, evil, reproaches, envy, hatred, theft and hypocrisy are the instigation of the accursed enemy. Everyone who pursues any of these passions becomes like Satan. For this reason, let the one who seeks out his own salvation flee from these vices. Know that our Saviour never went to war with Satan in elevating himself through his divine nature; rather, he was humble until the time when Satan was defeated. The Lord taught us too to contend with the enemy with the same measure until we have defeated him. Let us, then, learn from the humility of the Teacher and then let us obtain victory.

Beloved, let us be strangers to this world so that we may be made worthy of eternal blessings.

The first sin that was committed in Paradise was that of gluttony.

The first thing the Saviour accomplished after his baptism was to fast for forty days and the enemy was thereby cast down. Thus, let us strive towards that which the Saviour has taught us – let us approach fasting by emulating his great feat. Let us increase our fasting and we will receive a greater reward.

Know that the Holy Forty-Day Fast is a leaven for the whole year and for this reason we must observe abstinence with great care. For if the leaven loses its strength, all of the bread is spoilt.

Fasting is harnessed to certain virtues which are known to us, but they bear fruit only when they are combined together. Be attentive, neglect not the fast and enemies who envy us and who strive to trample down our virtues will not be able to cause us any harm. The more we neglect fasting, the greater harm they will inflict upon.

For this reason, at the time of the hamsin, if you cannot fast and cannot do earthly prostrations, then be of good cheer and read Scripture with great diligence. Accomplish your service with great attention and the fear [of God], do not neglect attending church. Know that the angel of the Lord, imbued with a special grace, knows who is worthy [in their spiritual life] and rejoices with him and blesses him. For the unworthy he is downcast and grieves for them.

My children, be attentive and do not be bold in approaching the Holy Mysteries if there is a reason that you fear that they will be for condemnation or death for you (cf. 1 Cor 11.29-30). Never be tardy in attending church services, listen to the psalms and the hymns of praise and Scripture before approaching to commune with the body of Christ and his life-giving blood. This mystery expels from your hearts the powers of darkness and cleanses your hearts from all impurity, for the Saviour says: ‘Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them’ (Jn 6.56).

The powers of darkness triumph over the one who is heedless and resists receiving the body and blood of Christ. They defile his heart and take him away from the grace he has received from the Saviour.



Thus, we are not to retain within ourselves vices and impurity which hinder us from approaching the Holy Mysteries with a pure heart and soul. Let us, then, be united with Christ for he makes us free from the power of the enemy.

Be of good spirit and be full of faith so that you draw near to the Lord with a pure heart and good deeds without hypocrisy so that you may worthily enter the heavenly Jerusalem and receive incorruptible crowns. And blessed is the one who finds our Saviour Jesus Christ, to whom belongs glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit unto the ages of ages. Amen.”

He then stated in conclusion: “Brothers, let us lament and may tears flow from our eyes now, before we depart to the place where our bodies are burnt in vain.”

And then the venerable Macarius wept and all began to weep with him and fell down prostrate with the words: ‘Father, pray for us.’

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