

## *The Spiritual Man*

### *His Holiness Pope Shenouda III*

#### **CHAPTER 2**

#### **THE SPIRITUAL MAN PUTS GOD FIRST IN ALL HIS CONCERNS**

**References: (Is 44:6 - Rev 1: 84:7 - Rev 12:6 - Rev 22:13)**

God is always the first. He said about Himself: *“I am the First and the Last.”* (Rev 22:13).

**And as God is the first, He cared about the first fruit of things and asked for them and gave us the commandment of the first fruit, its offering and blessing...**

**He said:** *“Sanctify to me all the first-born whatever opens the womb. It is mine”* (Ex 13:2). **Also,** *“the firstling of cattle and sheep, the first-fruits of your labours from the field ...you shall bring a sheaf of the first-fruit of your harvest,”* (Lev 23:10) **even the shearing of the sheep.**

**The Lord God did not require the first-fruit only but he blessed them too...**

Everything to Him is blessed and sanctified and so He said: *“Sanctify to me all the first-born.”* God blessed the first-born: he has the blessing, the birthright, the share of two of his brothers, the headship of the family after his father and the priesthood, before Aaron’s priesthood.

**The feeling of whoever gave the first fruits was that God comes first...**

The produce of his land, the offspring of his sheep and cattle and also the first-born were all to God and not to man, and he was glad that God is the first to take.

**So, if we look at the first commandment, we find it belongs to God...**

Yet it is not only the first commandment, but also the first four commandments, all the commandments of the first tablet concern God. The commandments of the second tablet relate to human relations, because God comes first.

**Likewise love is directed to God first, then later to people...**

**The first commandment of all is:** *“And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. This is the first commandment.”* **And the second, like it is this:** *“You shall love your neighbour as yourself.”* (Mk 12:30-31). **So God is first...**

**Because love is for God first, the Lord said:** *“He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me. And he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy to me”* (Mt 10:37).

**Even the soul does not come first, but God...**

**And so He said that for the sake of God you have to deny yourself and follow Him. He also said:** *“He who finds his life will lose it, and who loses his life for My sake will find it”* (Mt 10:39).

**The Spiritual Man puts God first in his life and his concerns.**

**No interests to hinder his love for God, or receive priority in his life....**

**The Lord Christ said to Martha:** *“You are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed”* (Lk 10:41).

**But Mary has chosen the good part and looked after Him.**

**And you my brother, what is your concern? What are the priorities in your life? According to your priorities, so would be your work and your will.**

People differ in their interests as Martha and Mary. Mary’s concern was with His love, sitting at His feet and listening to Him.

**One became a model for service and the other a model for contemplation.**

A few - like St Paul the Apostle- hold the two things. The pastors looked after the service and the monks were interested in the life of contemplation.

**IS GOD THE FIRST IN YOUR LIFE?**

In order to understand this question, we put before us the story of our father Abraham to whom God gave a son in his old age. And when he rejoiced in him, the Lord God said to him: *“Take*

*now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love and offer him to Me as a burnt offering” (Gen 22:2).*

How did our father Abraham act? He did not think twice but put God first, and his feelings as a father last. Also the feelings of Sarah, the mother of Isaac. God is the first, we love Him and obey Him, then comes Isaac who never precedes God. The Lord wants him as a burnt offering so the Lord's command must be enforced promptly and with content.

Also, the story of Hannah, the mother of Samuel, who was given a child after years of being barren, praying and weeping. But she put God first, and gave the child Samuel to serve the Lord in the temple.

**It is a lesson to every mother who refrains from giving her son to God to serve Him.**

Whether he wanted to become a monk or a priest... God is first and the motherly emotions come second or third. However, it is appropriate to present this son with joy.

This is also a lesson to every wife whose husband is called for priesthood. It is not right that she says: the service will preoccupy him and keep him away from me and from home!!! But it is proper that she presents him to the Lord and says: God is first.

**The Spiritual Man makes God first in obedience...**

And says with the Apostle: *“We ought to obey God rather than men”* (Acts 5:29). The commandments of God first, then people's request, then our wishes and personal requests. The spiritual Man makes obedience to men in the bounds of his obedience to God. But, if it contradicts with it, God ought to be obeyed first.

**And as he puts God first, he places himself last and never looks at himself at all...**

Consider the story of John the Baptist, who when Christ appeared, he abandoned his service, his glory, his preaching and his disciples too, and handed the bride to the bridegroom and stood afar rejoicing as a friend of the bridegroom, saying: *“He must increase, but I must decrease”* (Jn 3:30).

**THE LORD JESUS CHRIST WAS FULLY CONCERNED WITH OTHERS AND WITH THE KINGDOM OF GOD:**

*“He went about doing good” (Acts 10:38) “Preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease among the people” (Mt 4:23). He had compassion on all, and satisfied all from His delight... He preached good tidings to the poor; liberty to the captives and the opening of the prison to those who are bound (Is 61:1) .*

In the meantime He did not care about himself, and has nowhere to lay his head. (Lk 9:58).

He did not care about his dignity when a Samaritan village rejected Him. He rebuked his disciples who commanded that fire comes down from heaven and consume that village, and said to them: *“You do not know what manner of spirit you are of. For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men’s lives but to save them” (Lk 9: 51-56).*

Even on the cross, His whole concern was the salvation of men and forgiveness for those who crucified Him, and the paradise to the thief. He also cared for His Mother, the Virgin St Mary and His Disciple St John.

And you, what is your first concern? Is it yourself?!!

**The Spiritual Man comes out of the “self ” circle, to care about others, in a spiritual way ...**

Care from the depth of the heart, in which his service reaches high levels of giving and sacrifice, to the extent of giving the self too. He sacrifices his comfort for the comfort of others.

**SOMETIMES, ALL MAN’S INTEREST IS TO REACH A CERTAIN OBJECTIVE:**

And it might not be a spiritual objective, but to prove the existence of the self...

To reach this point, he does not care about the means: spiritual or nonspiritual... It does not worry him if it is a human or worldly trick or sinful ways... The whole concentration is how to reach the objective even if this man ruins himself... Similar to what king Ahab did to take the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite and what Queen Jezebel did so that her husband would reach his aim, even by crime, false accusation of Naboth and false witnesses.... And they both received punishment for what they did (1 Kings 21).

Also, what Rebekah did so that her son receives the blessing of his father. The purpose was spiritual , yet the concentration on it made them lose the good means and so they used deceitful ways (Gen 27).

Likewise, a servant might care to fill the minds of his listeners with information without giving attention to how they grow in their spiritual lives.... His only interest is in the information not the spiritualities.

Or a father who gives his children words from the Bible to memorize and does not care about the spiritual exercises that deepen their relationship with God. The Holy Bible says, "*These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone*" (Mt 23:23).

Another person in the service, his goal is how to fill the church with people and he does not care about their getting to God. He might even turn to worldly means!

Some sects give financial and social subsid[i]es to attract those who are in need, taking them away from their churches! Their main interest is not in the kingdom, but to increase their number, even at the expense of other churches.

**Now, we ask ourselves, what is our main concern?**

Our Lord Jesus Christ says in the Sermon on the Mount:

***"But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness" (Mt 6:33).***

There is a problem that we find in the spending and projects of some churches...

Most of the money they spent on building and construction works or the beautification and decoration of the church with icons and expensive chandeliers. The church council or the priests do not show the same interest to the service of the needy or to the neighbouring districts or even the spiritual service in the church itself... Unfortunately, all the interest is concentrated on the building and the decor..

**THE SAME SITUATION APPLIES TO THE FAMILY'S CARE FOR THE CHILD...**

The father and mother say that their main concern is to bring up their children and care for their future. It is well said. But which type of upbringing they care about? They care about their health, eating, drinking and clothing. Also their education, preparing them for a suitable job and then getting them married... Afterwards, each of the father and the mother would say: "Thank you Lord, I have fulfilled my mission towards my children. Now my conscience is at ease."

**However, they do not put into consideration their children's spiritual education and everlasting fate!**

They do not give them their spiritual daily bread like giving them their material food. If you ask them about their duty, perhaps they would answer: "We have sent them to Sunday school..." without following up the lessons they received or memorized, and without adding anything during the week, as if the father is not responsible for his son's religious information and his spiritual upbringing! And as if the mother is not responsible, and she is the one who received him from the baptistery as his godmother, to look after his spiritual needs, religious education and practising virtues...

In the social service, we might find the same phenomenon.

Our main or sole concern is to look after the poor financially or the unemployment problems or sickness or accommodation, and rarely we give true attention to their spirituality. And if a spiritual meeting is held for them, it could be formal, not caring to unite these people with God or to make sure of their spiritual lives, their confession, repentance and partaking in Holy Communion.

In the field of service, the same situation applies to prayer, as well as the lives of many servants... They care about the preparation of the lesson more than caring to prepare themselves spiritually... They care about the hours of service, the meetings, the pictures and presents, the library, the club, the visitation and the activities ... Rarely - by the same measure- they care about their prayers. There are no prayer meetings like the youth meetings.

**Activities take the first attention and not prayers.**

If we enter into details, we find out that the spiritual work does not take the first attention... For example the club: we care about its location, games, sport activities and entertainment. We may look after the arrangement of cards, timetables , competitions, acting and chorus groups.. In all this, there might be no full spiritual supervision and we find that the clubs in their noise and mistakes do not give the expected spiritual picture. Perhaps such clubs will not differ from the public clubs because of the absence of the spiritual supervisor.

**Why? The open answer is: ... because we failed to put God on the top of our interests.**

You, for example, when you wake up every morning, what do you care for?

Do you care about your daily life, wash your face, have breakfast, wear your clothes and get ready to go to work? Or your first concern is how to start your day with the Lord, with prayer, with reading and contemplation? Your action will be according to your interest....

Some apologize saying: "I did not have time to pray". And I always reject such excuse, which I do not consider as the real cause, and say: If you put prayer and contemplation first, you would make the time... Therefore give God priority in everything...

At your leisure, do not prefer your bodily relaxation to your spiritual work with God, whether in prayer or service. Do not give in to sleep or slackness but you ought to sacrifice your rest for the sake of God.

Also, in fasting, do not say my health, my need for proteins and amino acids, but say: God is first.

And so let God be first in the question of giving and the tithes...

**Do not worry about your other expenses, putting God at the end of your list - if anything is left for him, it is okay. Otherwise, we apologize to God or delay His rights because God is not the first.**

**Let God be at the beginning of every work and every day.**

The first to talk to is God. Every work you do, put God in it first. Pray in your coming in or going out, in your eating and drinking. In your work, you speak to God first.... If you put God first, you will not sin to Him:

Because you put Him above your worldly desires, above every earthly pleasure... God is always before you and the world is behind you...

Man sins because he does not put God in front of him, does not remember Him before every fall and does not consider His feelings.

Make God the first, with regard to time, importance, desires, love and longing and obedience too... Let Him be the first in everything.

And when God says: "*My son give me your heart*" (Prov 23:26), **He means that He has the priority in your life, feelings and interests and if anything contradicted with Him, you say**

**from within:** *“For what is a man profited if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul”* (Mt 16:26). **The loss of his soul is its deprivation from God...**

**The Spiritual Man does not only put God first and before everything, but his relationship with God is everything in his life...**

He says with the Apostle: *“For to me, to live is Christ”* (Phil 1:21). And also says: *“It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me”* (Gal 2:20).

Finally, I do not want to overburden you with many advices , but I say to you one advice only, if carried out, you have fulfilled all the commandments:

**Make God the prime of your concerns, and do not live separate or away from Him. Begin your day and every work you do with Him.**