

Christian Behaviour: On Reading

Last Updated Wednesday, 13 August 2008

Christian Behaviour: On Reading

by H.H. Pope Kyrillos (Cyril) VI

An excerpt from the book "Christian Behaviour". This section deals with the importance of reading for the monk and layperson alike.

The Importance of Spiritual Reading

The Lord Jesus said, "You search the Scriptures, for in them you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me." (John 5:39), and David, the prophet, said, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and light to my path." (Psalm 119:105).

Every man's body needs food to live. The Spirit needs nourishment as well. If the perishable food is the nourishment of the perishable body, then, the food that nourishes the immortal soul should be immortal. Thus, Jesus said, "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life." (John 6:63).

Therefore, every believer should have daily food from the words of God that revives his soul. But whoever is not serious about reading the words of God will die, and the devil will subdue him and banish him to the darkness of sin and ignorance. The prophet Isaiah said, "Therefore my people have gone into captivity, because they have no knowledge; their honorable men are famished, and their multitude dried up with thirst." (Isaiah 5:13). And Hosea, the prophet, said, "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge." (Hosea 4:6).

If this is incumbent upon the believer then it is much more for the monk who forsakes the world to abide in the Lord Jesus Christ. He must have His bread from the words of God more so than those who are in the world and are occupied with earning their daily food raising their children.

Our forefathers, the teachers, read more than they performed any other task. That is why St. John the Short said, "Always read for it is better than any other work. The mind may go astray in prayer, but reading awakens it."

A monk should also read the teachings of the monastic fathers, those saints who have been sufficiently fed with the words of God and were filled with His Holy Spirit. They tested the path, they were tried with every trial, and were victorious. To them applies the divine saying, "Whoever does and teaches these commandments, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven." (Matt. 5:19).

A wise man once said to Abba Anthony, "How can you be so steadfast in the wilderness although you have no books to comfort you?" Abba Anthony replied, "My books take the shape of the examples of those who were before me, but when I read, I only read the word of God in the Bible." (Paradise of the Desert Fathers).

St. Anthony also said, "I saw many monks who were confused because they depended solely on their own knowledge and did not heed the advice, 'Ask your father and He will tell you; ask your elders, they will inform you.'" (Paradise of the Desert Fathers).

Commentary on H.H. Pope Kyrillos' Life

Pope Kyrollos lived in this manner. He read the Holy Bible daily until the day of his death. He also would read the saint's books, especially the books of St. Isaac. Nothing prevented him from his readings, whether other work, fatigue, or sickness. His speech was always from the Holy Scriptures and the sayings of St. Isaac whenever he spoke to his disciples, the monks, or visitors. He said, "I was ordained a monk, and from that day on, I began learning the laws of monasticism from the fathers. I studied the saint's books, especially the book of the great saint, St. Isaac. I felt the blessings of God increasing on a daily basis."

He wrote to one of his spiritual sons, a monk, "Honor reading and persist in it, if possible, more than prayer. Reading is the spring of intelligent prayer. For, as I had previously told you, reading for a good purpose will show you how to walk on the virtuous path. Whoever reads the books to understand the path of virtue, this path will be opened before him."

He also wrote: "Before you teach, do your best to practice what you preach. As it is written, our Lord Jesus, at the beginning of the book of Acts instructed, 'Whosoever shall practice what he teaches, shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.' All the teachings can be found in the books of our fathers, the saints, for whom we are grateful."

Interview

In an interview with the daily newspaper Al-Ahram, Pope Kyrollos VI, after being ordained Patriarch of Alexandria, replied to the following questions addressed to him:

Q: What is the best book you have read, other than the Bible, a non-religious book (in literature for example)?

A: Monasticism and seclusion provide a unique philosophy on life, a philosophy that takes a very deep interest in all that binds man to God. The way to this is to read only spiritual books. Reading any other books hurts the monk more than it benefits him, or at the very least will make his mind go astray.

Q: What is the best religious book you have read other than the Bible?

A: The book written by St. Isaac the Syrian. It deals with the life of seclusion and tranquility. St. Isaac is the man who was chosen to be Iraq's bishop, but he left the bishopric to go and worship.

Q: Did you ever believe that someday you would become the Coptic Patriarch?

A: Of course not, the life of monasticism is grounded on asceticism.