<u>Lecture II:</u> Completeness in God παωκ έβολ ξεη ψηογ†

"A satisfied soul loathes the honeycomb." (Proverbs 27:7)

Our ultimate spiritual goal is **Completeness in God**. His Holiness Pope Shenouda III states the "spiritual aspirant is God alone, and none but Him. His sole aim is to endeavor to seek God, to know Him, love Him, live with Him, abide in Him, and acquire a relationship with Him. His aim is for God to dwell in his heart and for Him to dwell in God's heart, so that he says to God in love, 'And there is none upon earth that I desire besides You' (Psalm 73:25). Thus by clinging to God he can do without all things. His love for God leads him to detachment and asceticism. The more he experiences and tastes the sweetness of life with God, the more he feels that everything in the world is vanity and grasping for the wind" (Ecclesiastes 2:11).

We should consider every goal that severs us from God and Eternal Salvation as a delusion from the devil and immediately reject it. The chaste Joseph lost his freedom when he was sold as a slave, lost his reputation when he was thrown into prison and lost his parents, brothers and country when he lived in a strange land. But God alone sufficed him, Joseph desired **Completeness in God**.

Abraham found **Completeness in God**. The patriarch left his kindred and country readily (Genesis 12:1) and did not know where he was going (Hebrew 11:8). He could take his son and offer him as a burnt offering to the Lord because he spiritually trusted his **Completeness in God**.

St. Paul the Apostle could give up his position, his authority, and his association with political leaders because none of them were his true goal. He was able to say, **'I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ'** (Philippians 3:8). The Lord Jesus Christ was his goal.

Daniel the Prophet did not prefer the royal palace and its life. He did not desire a royal rank nor want to eat of the king's delicacies. Daniel definitely did not raise concern over being thrown into the lions den, pleading to do whatever it would take to forgo this torture. Why? Daniel found **Completeness in God**.

His Holiness cautions us to beware on the path to spiritual completeness that our aim should always be God. Prayer, fasting, knowledge, contemplation and reading are but means which lead us to our sole aim which is **Completeness in God**. What does His Holiness mean? His Holiness explains that if you turn these practices into aims then you would have pursued them as ends in themselves. You may advance in them and at the same time you are alienated from God who said, *"These people...honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me"* (Matthew 15:8).

Are you one thinking these are spiritual aspirations rather than aims, and often times difficult ones? We are taught self-coercion may be needed to strive toward **Completeness in God.** Self-coercion means that a person forces himself to walk in the spiritual path seeking completeness. No one simply finds completeness. It is an effort. For many the love of God may be the destination of the path or the culmination of the relationship with God, and not the starting point. But a person can start with the fear of God, as the Holy Bible says, *"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."*

A person wakes up from sleep and the fear of God begins to enter into his heart. He fears condemnation from his sins, fears the wrath of God, and fears that death might overtake him while he is not spiritually ready for it. This fear will cause him to seek **Completeness in God**.

Self-coercion is the starting point in feeling completeness. The beginner seeking completeness may not have strong feelings encouraging him to pray long prayers at night, or with tenderness of heart. Yet he forces himself to pray, and if he is tempted to shorten his prayers forces himself to continue in prayer. If he feels he is too physically exhausted to arrive at Church when the doors are open, not to miss a single syllable of a prayer he forces himself in the car to arrive on time. He controls his scattered intellect during the Divine Liturgy through training. The technique of self-coercion is one of discipline.

One of the early Church Fathers said, "*If you wait until you reach pure prayer and then start to pray, you will never pray.*" This is because pure prayer, i.e. pure worship is not the starting point but the culmination of these spiritual endeavors. God may look at your exertion and striving, your patience endurance and perseverance, and irradiate you with His Grace or uplift you a step towards purer prayer.

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^{*}This lecture synopsis is adapted from '<u>Characteristics of the Spiritual Path'</u> by His Holiness Pope Shenouda III.