

Pope Kyrillos VI on Seclusion

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Written by H.H. Pope Kyrillos (Cyril) VI

The following article is based on extracts of letters and correspondence of the late saintly Pope Kyrillos VI on the topic of "Seclusion". While mainly addressed to monks, the article still speaks loudly to those of us living in this fast-paced world who are in desperate need of learning about silence and spiritual solitude...it is in such silence that we hear the voice of God ("Be still, and know that I am God" - Psalm 46:10).

On Seclusion

Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Jeremiah the Prophet spoke about solitude and seclusion in simple but meaningful words. Pope Kyrillos VI chose some of these words and used them in a letter's introduction he sent to a monk:

"I said, 'O, that I had wings like a dove for then would I fly away and be at rest, then would I wander far off, and remain in the wilderness'."

"This I recall to my mind, therefore have I hope. Through the Lord's mercies we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. 'The Lord is my portion', says my soul, 'therefore I hope in Him!' The Lord is good to those who wait for Him, to the soul who seeks Him. It is good that one should hope and wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord. It is good for a man to bear the yoke in his youth. Let him sit alone and keep silent, because God has laid it on him." (Lamentations 3:21-28).

Pope Kyrillos VI explains solitude through the sayings of the holy fathers:

"St. Isaac the Great said, 'In older times, our holy fathers encouraged everyone, men, women, children, the elderly and the simpleminded, to live in peace. Whoever, among the brothers, the monks, wants to please our Lord Jesus Christ, should believe in the promises of our Lord. He should protect himself from the Lord's wrath by maintaining silence, fearing nothing, depending on and hoping in His grace. The spirit of the Psalms will comfort and encourage him. Those who are in seclusion, maintaining silence, and trusting in the Lord, should fear nothing. As Jerusalem is surrounded by mountains, so Christ, our Lord surrounds us; and whoever puts his trust in the Lord, the grace of the Spirit will surround him. 'The angel of the Lord encamps all around those who fear Him, and delivers them'. (Psalm 34:7). Each of us has a guardian angel that saves us, prays for us, enlightens our mind, and gives us spiritual insights. He, who lives in solitude and tranquillity, is surrounded by the grace of our Lord. An angel always guards him, comforts him, and guides him. Blessed be our Lord Jesus Christ who gave us the gift of silence. Blessed is the hermit who loves the Lord and abides in Him, and accepts troubles with forbearance in order to gain eternal life'."

"My beloved, through the grace of God, I shall continue writing to you of the glories of this path. To walk in this path, in conformity with the laws of the fathers, one will gain unspeakable joys. One's heart will always be comforted. One will be free from sorrow and grief, enjoying happiness and joy. In comparison, all the worldly joys and pleasures are worth nothing. God is able to provide us with this gift through His grace and not through our works or righteousness."

Pope Kyrillos VI related his personal experience to his sons, the monks, should they wish to follow in the path that he took:

"I have become accustomed to a life of solitude, and yearning for this life, I was driven towards it again. On

my way to the monastery, our Lord Christ guided me to a cave in the mountain that was carved out by the late Hegomen Sarabamoun. I took one of the laborers with me and had it cleaned so that I may live in it. It is difficult for me to describe what happened during my first night there. I felt that the enemy had gathered all his forces to battle against a weak man like myself. I was filled with fear, for man's nature is weak, as I heard terrible sounds and fearful quakes. But, with God's care as an invisible power, I was encouraged, remembering, 'Fear not, for they that are with you are more than they that are against you'. As the Prophet David said, 'I have set the Lord always before me, because He is at my right hand, I will not be moved. Therefore, my heart is glad, and I rejoice at His glory'. The next day, the monks came and wanted to bring me back to the monastery against my wishes, but they failed. They sent a telegram to the patriarch, and another one to the president. After strong opposition from all, the patriarch agreed that I could stay in the cave. I thank the Lord for His mercies.

"I walked, through God's grace, along this path. I would go weekly to the monastery to partake of the divine mysteries, and obtain my ration. During my stay in the cave, I met with severe wars and opposition from the devil."

His Holiness replied to one of the brothers who had written him regarding the dangers of seclusion, and the consequences of making such a rash decision without sufficient thought or guidance, "You asked, 'Do you want to sit alone in a cave to seek fame, the praise of people, and high esteem'? How can you say this? If I wished this, I would have continued at the monastic ecclesiastical college to be famous in the sciences and other fields, thereby attaining high status. You said, 'You are full of envy, and you cannot bear to see others in a higher status than you'. It is good for a man to escape far away so as not to envy his brother. You asked, 'Is this a way to escape working in the monastery'? You made several other comments that I am unable to repeat. In conclusion, you said that you are worried about the troubles that will besiege me. God forbid! What are you so worried about? Am I better than any of my colleagues, or the sons of the kings who dwelt in caves, or our forefathers of whom I am not as worthy as the dust on their feet? No, a thousand times no! I am not worthy to compare myself to the least, the smallest, the most despised monk of all monasteries and, permit me to say, that I am not even worthy to be equal to a wild donkey. Do you know why I want to live in a cave? No, you do not. But you judge according to appearances, for what man knows the thoughts of another man save the Spirit that dwells within him? Do I want to dwell in the cave because I am holier than the other monks? No, but I desired this path, as one of the fathers said, because a monk who finds himself faced with wars and battles, should have tranquillity in his cave in order to conquer evil thoughts. If you experienced the wars that faced me, you would agree with what this father said of his own experiences. I have had the idea of dwelling in the cave for nearly three years now. Whenever I thought about it, my heart felt terror, and my whole body trembled with fear. These thoughts haunted me frequently, leading me to experience unbelievable dejection and concern. I lacked the courage to take such a step. Do you know the reason why I celebrated many Divine Liturgies? I was pleading with God, night and day, to guide me according to His will. Do you know why I traveled to Sohag? It was my intent to dwell in a cave not in the monastery. Do you know the reason I left school (of divinity) when our great pope allowed me to choose between the monastery and the cave? It was for the same reason; I wanted to dwell in a cave. This information is for you so that you are no longer disturbed about this matter. "

"I am going to stay in the monastery and pray and beseech Jesus Christ to look upon me with His mercy and to prepare the way for me. I sought the opinions of the faithful fathers, I revealed my thoughts to them, I searched the books of the saints and, I celebrated the Divine Liturgy in the monastery. I hope that God will facilitate this matter according to His will. Whatever may come from the enemy, may the Lord cause it to fail. Rest assured and do not reflect upon this matter too much. Leave it in God's hands, for man cannot prevent anything that the Lord has ordained to happen."

"I do appreciate your love and kindness, but remember I am God's servant. Am I a servant to a cruel and domineering master? No, I serve a merciful Master and a great God, and no power under the sun can challenge Him. He will help me complete my course in life well. 'Cast your burden upon the Lord, and He shall sustain you'. 'Blessed are those who trust in God, fear not...'"

Pope Kyrollos VI experienced and walked in solitude. He understood the value of the heavenly comfort hermits received when they walked in the Lord's path, followed the lead of the forefathers and accepted the counsel in the books of the saints. He was pleased with every monk who wanted to become a hermit. He helped them to fulfill this by supporting them with letters and guidance.

Hegomen Mina the Hermit (Pope Kyrollos VI) sent the following letter to Hegomen Mina of St. Samuel's Monastery. In the letter, he was recommending a monk who had come to him seeking permission to become a hermit. "I introduce to you Father _____, our beloved brother, who wishes seclusion. I am interested in having his request granted. I hope that you will approve his request and permit him to dwell in the cave that is near the monastery. God will reward you in heaven. I am confident that you will take care of our beloved brother, Father _____. Try your best to facilitate this matter. God guide everyone's life in accordance with His good will. He enlightens our ways so that we may not fall and reach our heavenly home safely."

Pope Kyrollos encouraged the monks to walk the solitary path of seclusion. He wrote, "It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth. Saint Isaac, in wisdom said, 'Love seclusion, even if you are incapable of experiencing its full benefits. One prayer that a man says in seclusion is better than a hundred prayers said with a crowd. Anyone who is aware of his sins knows that seclusion is better than benefiting the whole world with his appearance. He who cries over his sins in seclusion is better than the one who raises the dead by his prayer'. He also said, 'To sleep one night in seclusion is better than working a hundred days among people'.

"Blessings, grace and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ our Redeemer and Savior, and the Holy Spirit our Guide and Comforter. My beloved sons, whom I truly love, I was very pleased to hear of your desire for seclusion. I greatly thanked our Lord for giving you this great blessing. Truly, the most difficult struggle is patience and acceptance of God's ordinances. It is true that our forefathers encouraged solitude. They gave these orders and strictly stressed them. St. Isaac said, 'Those who left the world and went to the monastery should, after staying a while, serve in the community, learn the tradition of monasticism, and bear anything that befalls them. After that, God's grace grants them the gift of solitary life, should they feel the calling to do so with God's help. The monk should ensure that his motivation to lead the solitary life is pure and not the result of his lusts or aspirations. He must ascertain that God's grace is guiding him. A condition of a hermit's life is that his motivation is pure and not the coveting of gifts or praise by people, or worldly honor. He should be remorseful of his sins. He should humble himself, and remain in his cave, lest he become a stumbling-block to people. Seclusion is not for practicing virtues, for living within a community can also encourage the practice of virtues. Rather, seclusion is to allow the heart to remain silent and calm. There are three open doors, which if they become well secured, will allow us to see Christ: the door on a monk's physical shelter, the door on thoughts and senses, and the door on the heart. Without the closing the first door, it is impossible to acquire the second; without the second, it is impossible to acquire the third. Being inside the cave helps guard the senses and thoughts resulting in a pure and quiet heart. When purity of heart is attained, one can see God. There is so much more that I could say and write about the benefits of solitude, yet time will not allow me. The benefits of solitude far exceed those of living amongst people. Be strong and happy, trusting in God's grace all you who lead the solitary life."

Pope Kyrollos VI concludes his letter, "Great is the gift you have received, that is, solitude. Yes, my son, the blessings of solitude are very great. But, we should never forget the difficult wars facing those who proceed in this path; fear at night, grief and sadness by day, persecution by the devils and their tricks. He offers wisdom from the Bible: 'The Lord keeps you'. 'The sun shall not smite you by day, nor the moon by night'. 'Do not fear, I am with you'. 'Have courage, and He shall strengthen your heart'. 'Be strong and of a good courage; fear not'. 'Those who are with us are more than those who are against us'. 'The Lord is my strength and my salvation, whom shall I fear'.

"The first condition of a life of solitude is motivation that is pure; the second is prayer of the canonical hours, and the third is the support of a spiritual guide. These three conditions are essential. If the second and third conditions cannot be readily fulfilled, then adhering to the first condition becomes of greater importance.

"My sons, walk in reliance upon the Lord's blessings being very careful of every step we take. Study the books and the teachings of the saints, because they function as our guidance during these times. We should walk quietly step by step, not too rushed, or coveting the rewards of the hermits. The rewards that the hermits receive, certainly are the result of extensive struggles to the extent of shedding their blood. These rewards are not manifested immediately, rather through perseverance and long suffering. A youth once approached an elder and complained to him of his trials and tribulations. The elder beheld the youth and said, 'My son you are young and God would not permit that you enter into temptation'. The youth said, 'Yes, I am indeed a youth, but the trials and tribulations of strong men befall me'. The elder said to him, 'Keep silent, the Lord loves you'. The youth said, 'How can He love me, when I taste death every day'? The elder replied, 'The Lord will grant you the gift of peace and joy. My son, I want you to know that during my thirty years of seclusion, not a single day passed without trials and tribulations. But, I tell you, after the first eighteen years, I began to feel rest with the Lord, and now, after thirty years, this feeling has grown. The peace and joy in God that one is granted, is boundless. Today, when I begin my service, my mind is in heaven with God. The struggle of few days can result in the acquisition of great blessing'. The youth was comforted by these words. He accepted his struggles and the Lord granted him peace.

"I entreat you my sons, in the name of love, to walk quietly and in humility, for, 'God grants grace unto the lowly'. May the Lord Almighty grant you the spirit of wisdom and understanding. May the Lord send the angel of peace to surround you and save you from the snares of the enemy. Finally, may He enlighten your path. I ask that you pray for us before the throne of His glory. I pray to see you so that together we may be comforted in faith. The grace of our Lord be with you. Accept my salutation."

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