

Teaching & handing on

We live in an age where spiritual teaching and schools of thought have multiplied; each advocating its thoughts and ways trying to spread them and attract as many as they can to them. In addition to this, there are various translations and also old manuscripts and Church heritage are edited and reprinted. As a result, we have a platform of all kinds of teaching: genuine, mixed and false.

Only few have questioned whether the teaching they hear is from God or if people are speaking from themselves: *'If anyone wants to do His will, he will know about my teaching, whether it is from God or I am speaking from myself'* (John 7: 17). These people need someone to help them discern the genuine from the fake, the precious from the vile. Also, only few realise that they are wounded and sick with various spiritual ailments and that they need a physician to lead them in the path of true and complete healing.

Despite the abundance and availability of genuine authentic teaching, the spiritual life in our generation is characterised by shallowness and superficiality; it is characterised by mixing the divine truth with what we may call 'common traditions' –exactly as the Pharisees did: *'Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men. For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men'* (Mark 7: 7, 8).

The first Church was established on two main pillars; namely, *'teaching'* and *'handing/passing on'*. Before the books of the New Testament were written and collated in the way we have them now, all those who became Christians and joined the early Church accepted the truths of faith and saw these truths lived out in human examples. The life of those people witnessed to the truth and authenticity of the teaching. Therefore, for example, Apostle Paul tells his disciple Timothy: *'And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also'* (2Timothy 2: 2).

Teaching offers the divine truths which are explained by teachers who are granted the gift of teaching by the Holy Spirit living in them: *'And He Himself gave some to be*

apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers' (Ephesians 4: 11).

Handing on offers the practical application of these truths, that is, how these truths can actually be lived out in the practical life.

The Holy Spirit prepares the *'teacher'* through a long journey. He creates and weaves this divine gift in the person. As the person responds to the work of the Holy Spirit and also studies the word of God, this gift develops and shines in him. As a result, when this person explains the divine truths, he presents them in a holistic and complete way. Through the long journey of preparation, this person would have experienced the stumbling blocks of the spiritual walk and at the same time he would have experienced the sweetness of the way and its fruits would have been manifested in his life. As a result, he would be able to lead others, his spiritual children, in the way with discernment and through divine light. Based on this, the Church considers the spiritual fatherhood to be of great importance. A spiritual father who is neither aware of the ways of the devil nor trained in the way of perfection in Christ will not only be unable to resist the enemy in his personal walk, but he will also be in a situation which will not permit him to guide and heal others. This is similar to someone who has the title of a *'General'* without having been well trained in the art of war or ever fought a battle, but have only focused on the glamorous outward appearance of his uniform in processions and shows. Rather, he should be as Jacob was with Joseph: *'I have given to you one portion above your brothers, which I took from the hand of the Amorite with my sword and my bow'* (Genesis 48: 22).

Therefore, *handing on* is also a grace and a gift from God which He grants to the person. The person who hands on should have true discernment regarding those who receive the teaching because he may present a holistic teaching but it may still be received partially and in an incomplete way; or, he may offer a teaching which does not suit the spiritual stature of the listeners or is presented at an unsuitable timing.

Therefore, Saint John of the ladder says: *'what may be a medicine for one could be a poison for another'*. Besides, the same medicine for the same person can be a treatment

at a certain time, but a poison at another time. When taken at the right time, the medicine functions as a treatment, but when taken at the wrong time, it can function as a poison.

In the history of Christian Coptic monasticism, we read that all monks and worshippers had one question: *'how can I be saved?'* They used to go to the spiritual father and say: *'father, tell me a word for my spiritual benefit'*. The answer to this same question varied from one spiritual father to the other and even the same father would give a different answer to each monk according to what is suitable for him.

This is how the early Church lived. Through both 'teaching' and 'handing on', the listener would receive both understanding and grace. The understanding takes him half way and the grace strengthens him enabling him to continue the other half of the way. Even when this person stumbles or falls, there is no worry because there is someone to help clear his confusion, light his darkness, strengthen his faith so that he would arise and continue the walk.

We are in great need these days for such teachers whom the Holy Spirit has favoured with this dual gift and grace: *teaching and handing on*. Teaching will remain the same; it is unchangeable because God does not change. Yet the need remains for those who can personify and exemplify this teaching and hand it on as a true living testimony to the generation of the end times.

Below are some verses which highlight the principle of 'handing on' as clear in the writings of Apostle Paul:

*'The things which you learned and **received** and heard and saw in me, these do, and the God of peace will be with you'* (Philippians 4: 9).

*'For I received from the Lord what I also **passed on** to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night in which he was betrayed, took bread...'* (1Corinthians 11: 23)

*'Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you **received** and in which you stand...'* (1Corinthians 15: 1)

*'For I **passed on** to you as of first importance what I also received...' (1Corinthians 15: 3)*

'As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed' (Galatians 1: 9).

'For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ' (Galatians 1: 12).

'As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him' (Colossians 2: 6).

According to the early Church, the spiritual disciples would say such and such a father is the one who passed on to us the life in Christ.

'And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers' (1Thessalonians 2: 13).

'Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe' (Heb.12:28)

The word 'receive' used here in Greek is: *paralambanō*

This is the word which is translated into different words but it refers and emphasizes the need of handing down or passing on experiences in addition to the teaching of the spiritual life of salvation.

Glory be to God.