

CONVERSATION BETWEEN ABBA MACARIOS AND AN ANGEL OF THE LORD

One day Abba Macarios was walking in the desert. Behind him walked an Angel of the Lord, who said to him:

“Your blessing holy Father.”

Abba Macarios took him to be an ascetic of the desert and said:

“May the Lord forgive you my child.”

As they walked along together Abba Macarios noticed the figure and appearance of the monk and said to him:

“My child, I see you and marvel! What is this wonderful appearance and beauty of yours? I have never seen such beauty in a human face. Perhaps you are not a man? In the name of God of Heaven tell me the truth.”

Then the angel bowed to the Elder and said:

“Bless me father, as you can see I am an angel and have come to teach you unknown mysteries which you desire to know.”

The Elder bowed and said:

“Lord I thank you, because you have sent me a guide to teach me of things unknown, and mysteries which I desire to learn.”

The angel again answered:

“Tell me what it is you desire to know.”

The Elder said to him:

“Holy angel tell me, do people recognise one another in the life to come?”

And the angel replied:

“Just as in this life when people go to sleep, on waking up they still recognise the people they knew before going to sleep, so it is in the life to come. People will recognise one another, and will communicate, and be joyous together. This is the case for the righteous but sinners are deprived of even this.”

Then the Abba said:

“Tell me, what happens after the soul departs from the body, and why are memorial ceremonies held for the dead?”

The angel then replied:

“On the third day after the separation of the soul from the body, the holy angels take the soul of the departed and so begins the ascent to heaven, so that the soul can worship our Lord Jesus Christ.

Between the earth and heaven, there is a big ladder, and on each step is found a host of demons who act in a manner similar to that of toll keepers, or frontier guards. The demons hold a list of our bad deeds, and says thus: ‘on a certain day you stole, fornicated, or you committed such and such a sin ...’ Then the angels reveal the good deeds, such as prayer, charity, liturgies, fasting, and any other such actions that one has performed. The angels and demons then weigh one’s deeds. If there is a surplus of good deeds, the angels take the soul and ascend to the next step.

This happens from one step to another as the soul ascends to heaven. With each aerial tollhouse being responsible for a specific type of sin or misdeed. On each step, the demons are more and more fierce than the previous ones. Finally, there occurs a fierce battle and indescribable struggle for the possession of the miserable soul.

The demons reproach and terrorise the soul, saying: ‘Where are you going? Was it not you who fornicated, and soiled Holy Baptism? Was it not you who soiled the monastic Angelic Schema? Where are you going now? Turn back. Return. Go to hell, which is the outer darkness, go back to the hellfire. Enter where the worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.’ Then, if that soul is condemned the demons take it below the earth where darkness, anguish and woe await. Woe to the day that this man was born.

Who could relate to you father, what the condemned souls suffer in that place. But if the soul is found clean it ascends to heaven with much joy, and is welcomed by the angels with candles and incense. They then escort the soul to the judgement throne, and worship our Lord Jesus Christ. It is then shown the Holy Disciples, Holy Martyrs, the ranks of the Holy Fathers, and the nine hierarchies of the Holy Angels.’

Abba Macarios then asked about memorial ceremonies, why and how they are celebrated. The Angel then answered:

“Well listen, Holy Father. The first memorial service is held on the third day after death. As we have said, the soul does not ascend to worship the Lord until the third day. This memorial service is celebrated as an offering to the Lord, for the sake of the soul of the departed. After worshipping the Lord, the soul of the departed with its escorting angels then returns to this earthly realm. There it is shown the various places that it frequented during this earthly life. It is then reminded of its earthly deeds, both the good and the evil ones.

The angels then say : ‘Here you stole, fornicated, masturbated, censured, murdered, committed perjury, loaned money at exorbitant rates of interest, became intoxicated, quarrelled and scandalised.’

Afterwards the good deeds are shown. ‘Here you have given in charity, there fasted, repented, partook in the Divine Liturgy, prayed, held vigil, gave supplications, kneeled in humility, remained standing during church services, showed self-restraint.’ So it continues, until the ninth day.

On the ninth day, they again ascend to heaven to worship, as during the third day. The memorial services held on the ninth day are to help secure the Lord’s leniency towards this soul. It is for this reason that it has been written that these intercessions are of the outmost importance.

Hence prayer, charity, liturgies, and memorial services aid the souls of the departed. These actions even have the ability of returning souls from hell.

After the soul has worshipped the Lord a second time, the angels again escort the soul back to the earthly realm. The angels then show the soul God’s mercy, paradise, the rest of the righteous, ‘God’s tabernacle’, ‘the bosom of Abraham’. When it sees this unutterable happiness it is consoled and overjoyed, and it beseeches the angels, so that it also, may stay in this abode, together with the righteous.

It is then shown the hell of the wicked. The angels say: ‘This is the river of hell-fire, the worm that does not die, this is the outer and inner darkness where one will gnash one’s teeth’. It is then shown the torments of the sinners. There does not exist, Holy father, anything worse or more frightful than the torments of those who fornicate or steal. Especially the fornication of a monk, nun, priest, or his wife.

When all this has been shown to the soul, it is again escorted on the fortieth day to worship the Lord. It is for this reason that memorial services for the dead are held on the fortieth day. The most merciful God will on that day decide where the soul is to reside. This outcome being dependant on one’s

deeds and actions, whilst on earth. Thus the soul sets off, and will be established there until the general resurrection, so that the body also may be resurrected and so receive its just rewards.”

Then the Elder sighed and wept bitterly saying:

“Woe to the day that this man was born!”

The Angel then said:

“Yes honourable Father, this applies for the sinner. For the righteous, it must be said, blessed is the day and hour he was born.”

The Elder then asked:

“Can you please tell me this thing also. Is there any rest or end for the torments of the sinner?”

The Angel replied:

“No Holy Father. Neither the kingdom of the righteous, nor that of the sinner has an end. If one were to remove a grain of sand every thousand years from the sea, one would have the hope of someday finishing. The hell of the wicked has no end.”

The Elder then said:

“Please answer me also this. Which saints are more merciful towards a man, so that he can beseech them for his wretchedness!”

The Angel replied saying:

“All the saints are merciful towards man, and are of a good disposition. Man is thankless and ungrateful, and it makes them angry towards you. The holy angels also have great mercy towards man, because they have seen the extraordinary acts performed by God for the salvation of man. Apart from the saints and angels it is our All Holy and Blessed Lady, the Virgin Mary who takes care of the human race above all others. Everybody, Holy Father, should have her name on their lips constantly, and thus glorify her name. It is due to Her interventions and supplications that man still exists. But the devil has deceived man, and made him ungrateful. Man has contempt for God and the saints, and so God and the saints show contempt for the fallen nature of man.”

The Elder then asks:

“Tell me Holy Angel, which is the most sinful of all the evils?”

And the Angel replied:

“Every sin, worthy Elder, severs man from God. But resentment and blasphemy stand above all other sins. This is because these two have the ability to throw man into the depths of hell, into the internal depths of the earth and sea.”

Then the Elder asked:

“Which sin does God despise above all other sins?”

The Angel replies:

“God despises above all other sins the vanity of self-conceit which is pride. This alone has destroyed all mankind. Adam the first man, was exiled because of this from paradise. With this, the Pharisee lost the fruits of all his labour. When man falls into this sin, it is very difficult for him to recover his senses.”

The Elder says:

“Which men are tormented more than the others?”

And the Angel said:

“I have told you the fornicator and the blasphemer. But I will tell you this also, below all of the other depths of hell there exists a level which is

frightful, merciless and cruel, and is known as oblivion. It is there that priests and monastic that have committed fornication are punished. These perverse and wicked individuals will suffer great punishment and dishonour. For this reason honourable Elder, the order of angels that fell will be replaced by the good priests and monks, and they will be elevated to a position of great honour.

This also applies to priests who break the law of God. Such priests who accept bribery, or who are corrupt, thus allowing the deviation of God's law, those who disdain the Holy Services, and their liturgical obligations for secular and worldly cares, even if only for a single liturgy. They will be obliged to give an account of their actions before God. What then can I say about those priests who allow themselves to become intoxicated. Woe to them because frightful punishments await them!"

Then the Elder said:

"Please can you also tell me of those who treat Sunday, the Lord's day with contempt, have they any repose in the life to come?"

The Angel answers:

"Woe to them Holy Father, because there awaits them frightful punishment. Whoever treats Sunday, the holy day of our Lord with contempt, holds the Lord in contempt and the Lord will hold him in contempt. Sunday celebrates the day that our Lord was resurrected, and whoever honours this day honours our Lord.

Whoever honours and celebrates the saints days will find that saints will help them. The saints have great boldness before the Lord, and if they ask anything of Him, He will not refuse them.

Man has estranged himself from the fear of God and in doing so, neither has it God as its friend, nor any of the saints. They are preoccupied with worldly and secular pursuits, which are transitory and corruptible. Woe to them. Recognise worthy Elder, that every person, be he a priest, or a monk, or a layman, if he does not honour Our Lords Day, Sunday, he will not see the face of the Lord, nor have hope of salvation.

Now Holy Father if you would like anything else of me please ask. For it is now time that I go to heaven, so as to present myself before the Lord and worship Him."

The Elder sighed deeply as he wept bitterly saying:

"Woe to us ! Behold the good servant of the Lord. Although he is an angel, sinless and immaterial, yet he cannot stay but must ascend to worship the Lord. But we may be sinful and material do not attend to our salvation but show contempt towards it."

He then asked the Angel:

"I beg you tell me, which prayer is most suitable for a monk?"

The Angel answered:

"If he is educated in the psalms of David, if not, the prayer 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me a sinner' will do! This prayer is the easiest, and most effective. Many learned people have renounced their knowledge, and by holding onto this prayer have been saved. It may be used by all. By those advanced in prayer, and also by those who are just beginning and inexperienced. Whoever wishes to be saved, should hold on to this prayer day and night, whether he is in his cell, or outside walking, it is this prayer which should be held onto with willingness and desire, because this prayer is capable of helping anyone who wishes to be saved."

The Elder then said:

“As you have come to teach me a sinner, I beg you please tell me this also: If a man who is still a sinner teaches another, and in doing so frees him from sin and shows him the true path, has he any reward?”

And the Angel says:

“Whoever teaches another and removes him from sins by showing him the proper path, saves himself, and the other soul is removed from hell. In a similar fashion, whoever directs someone towards evil, does not only destroy the other person, but also hands his own soul over to the devil. There is no worse sin than to direct another person towards evil deeds. Similarly there is no better action than to direct someone towards good deeds.”

When the Angel had finished these words of counsel he lowered his head towards the Elder and said:

“Bless me Holy Father, and please forgive me.”

Then the Elder fell on his knees and venerated the Angel saying:

“Go in peace, and appear before the Holy Trinity and intercede for me.”

When the Angel left, ascending towards heaven, Abba Macarios gave thanks to God and went to his cell, where he related these events to a certain brother of good faith and a co-ascetic, thus glorifying and worshipping the Lord unto all ages. Amen.