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Discipleship
BY
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INTRODUCTION

This book is part of a series which we are hoping to publish, God willing, for those engaged in any kind of ministry, to help prepare them for service. It can be seen as part of a course of instruction which the Church can follow for the purpose of teaching, and for the education of its young people. It is the fruit of two lectures: One which I gave at the conference on training ministers (September 1972), and another lecture which I gave at Banha in 1966.

Although you have this first book in the series in your hands, the next, "Holy Zeal", is already being printed, and it is hoped that the third book, which is on the spirituality of ministry, will be issued shortly.

I wish you all success in your service.

Pope Shenouda III

The Life of Discipleship

The Christian life is a life of discipleship.

Everyone who believes in Christ, is called to be His disciple.

Christ was called 'the Teacher', and 'the Good Teacher', being His disciple is something for all Christians to claim, Jesus had His special disciples who were called "**His own**" (John 13: 1). These were the men whom He prepared for

ministering the word (Acts 6:4). The Bible says about them that: *"He had called His twelve disciples to [Him], He gave them power [over] unclean spirits,"* (Matt. 10:1).

It says in the Sermon on the Mount: *"His disciples came to Him. Then He opened His mouth and taught them,"* (Matt. 5:1-2). And when He wanted to celebrate the Passover, He sent two of His disciples to say that, *"The Teacher says, 'Where is the guest room in which I may eat the Passover with My disciples?'"* (Mark 14:13-14).

The followers of John the Baptist were likewise called to be John's disciples. It says in the Bible that once, *"Then there arose a dispute between [some] of John's disciples and the Jews about purification."* (John 3:25). And on another occasion, the disciples of John came to the Lord Jesus Christ

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saying: *"Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but Your disciples do not fast?"* (Matt. 9:14).

The Pharisees used to call themselves the disciples of Moses, which is why, in a debate between the Jews and the man who had been born blind, whose sight the Lord restored, the Jews said: *"You are His disciple, but we are Moses' disciples."* (John 9:28).

We observe that preaching the gospel was taken to mean making disciples. When the Lord sent His disciples to preach the gospel, He said to them: *"... Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptising them ... teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you;"* (Matt. 28:19-20). And when Paul and Barnabas went to Derbe, it was said that, *"And when they had preached the gospel to that city and made many disciples,"* (Acts 14:21).

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The Necessary Conditions of Discipleship.

I should like to make two observations on the subject of discipleship:

- 1. That discipleship is not just a matter of learning particular facts, but rather, is a way of living.**
- 2. That discipleship has certain conditions which should be fulfilled in practical aspects of life.**

Thus the Lord said to His disciples: *"If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed."* (John 8:31).

So then simply listening to the words of a teacher, does not mean that one is his disciple. One has to be firmly grounded in his teaching. This means converting the teacher's words into a life, so that they become principles that are firmly established in the one who is learning.

The Lord Jesus gave us a sign, and a practical example, when He said to His disciples: *"... love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. **By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.**"* (John 13:34-50).

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Here the Lord Jesus is laying down a necessary qualification, a standard, without which they would not be considered His disciples. No matter how much they had learned from Him, in theory about life. If people did not find in the Lord Jesus's disciples that mutual love, then those disciples had no right to say that they were disciples of Christ! It was an essential sign.

Just as Christ loved everyone, so His disciples must be like Him. They, too, should behave and "to walk just as He

walked. " (1 John 2:6).

This reminds me of what the Lord said to the Jews who prided themselves on being sons of Abraham: *"If you were Abraham's children, you would do the works of Abraham. "* (John 8:39).

So true discipleship, then, is a discipleship of life which is manifested in a practical way in a person's way of living. It also reveals itself as being a discipleship according to a particular teacher who was himself distinguished by that quality of life and type of teaching.

This is why the Lord Jesus provided examples of people who could not be considered as His disciples. For instance, He said: *"If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. "* And *"So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple. "* (Luke 14:26,27,33).

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In this way Christ laid down the foundation for those who would be His disciples, which was that they should renounce the world in whole hearted dedication to Him, and love of God, above their friends or relations.

And in taking this point further when His disciple Peter asked him: *"... we have left all and followed You. Therefore what shall we have?"* (Matt. 19:27), the Lord answered, with the same kind of spiritual instruction: *"And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life. "* (Matt. 19:29).

So it is a basic principle, then, in discipleship for the Lord, that you leave everything for His sake, or that you are at least ready in you heart to leave everything, without feeling any regrets.

This is why the Lord added another necessary condition, which is that: *" No one, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."* (Luke 9: 62).

Being a disciple of the Lord needs steadfastness upon the way, with no turning back. It requires that a person be ready to endure for the sake of the Lord and His ministry, and that he should work hard for that purpose. Thus the Lord says: *"...*

***And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. "* (Luke 14:27).**

There are other necessary conditions of discipleship, such as commitment and accomplishment.

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Anyone who wants to be a disciple of the Lord Jesus must take on what he has heard and been taught as his duty, and carry it out, thereby transforming what he has learnt in theory into his practical life. What use are words if we just listen to them and then forget them, or memorise them just for the sake of information? Knowing this we can see what a lovely phrase it was that anyone of those who visited the Fathers used to say: **'Tell me a word which I might live by,'** for the word is his spiritual food. He takes it and nourishes his soul by it. He lives by it and benefits from it. He does not only gain intellectual benefit, but gains also in the practical aspects of life, so that it becomes a beneficial and useful word...

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A Beneficial Word.

The spiritual person becomes a disciple of the beneficial word. He searches for it from all sources: firstly from the Bible, then from the sayings of the fathers and the teachers who may be depended on, and then from any other source. Even if it should be a word that has come from the mouth of a sinner, it still might be beneficial.

An example of this is the story of Saint Ephram Al-Surriani and the woman who gazed at him.

This woman looked at St Ephram and stared so hard and for so long at him that he became embarrassed, and he asked her why she was fixing her gaze on him in that way? And she answered 'It's natural that I should look at a man, because women, when they were created, were taken from the body of a man. But as for you, you ought to look at the ground, because you were taken from the soil of the earth.'

The saint learned a useful lesson from this woman's words, and trained himself to look at the ground.

Another similar example is the benefit which St Anthony derived from the words of the woman who took off her clothes to bathe in front of him!

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He said to her: 'Aren't you ashamed of taking your clothes off before me, a monk? And the woman replied: 'If you were a monk, you would live in the heart of the desert, because this is not a suitable place for monks to live in.'

So St. Anthony profited considerably from her words, and said to himself: 'That was the voice of God coming to me, which He sent by the mouth of that woman.' He then went away to live far away in the desert.

In the past, people would cross land and sea on long journeys in order to ask one the fathers for a beneficial word.

The book 'Bustan al-Ruhban' is full of such stories. The journeys of Paladius, Jerone and Rufinus are all of this type. And their books have left us with a rich heritage which has been of spiritual benefit to the whole world...

It was not only young people or ordinary people who used to seek a word of advice from the desert fathers, but old people and Great people used to do so too.

There was St Theophilus (he was the 23rd Patriarch), who as Pope went many times to the monasteries to gain some beneficial advice from the saintly monks. His stories are well known from those of Anba Arsanius and Anba Paphnuti. As is the visit of Pope Benjamin (the 38th Patriarch) to the monasteries and places of recluse.

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It is also well-known that St Athanasius the Apostolic was a disciple of St. Anba Antonius the great.

We bear too, about how St Macarius the Great asked for a word of advice from the young Zachariah!!

The boy was amazed, and said to him: 'Are you, father, you who are the star of the desert and its light, asking me, a young boy, for a word of help?!

And St Macarius replied humbly: 'I trust, my son, in the holy Spirit who is in you, and that you have something which I need to know.'

There is also a story about how St Macarius received a beneficial word from a boy who was tending some cattle...

Discipleship need not be hampered by a person's age or situation. Blessed are those who live as disciples, ready and willing to learn, throughout their lives...

Our problem, however, is that we imagine that we already know something, or that we have reached a point at which we do not need to ask or learn any more... yet we find a group like the Lord's apostles asking Him, on one occasion: "*Lord, teach us to pray.*" (Luke 11:1).

Who was there who did not know how to pray?! Everybody knew... or they imagined that they knew. The apostles asked about a matter which seemed perfectly clear, but the result was

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that the Lord taught them the Lord's prayer, which was certainly of great benefit to them...

From this we can deduce that one of the characteristics of discipleship is humility.

It begins with a person feeling that he needs to learn, and to ask, and to seek guidance. That person then goes on to have the feeling that someone else has greater understanding than he, and that God is able to guide him through that other person.

On the question of the humility of discipleship, look at what St Paul said about himself: "*...I am indeed a Jew, ... at the feet of Gamaliel, taught according to the strictness of our fathers' law,*" (Acts 22:3). For the pupil was not permitted to sit on the same level as his master...

One of the necessary conditions of discipleship is that you must take care to remember what you have heard and keep it within you, and not forget it. As the prophet David said: "***Your word I have hidden in my heart, That I might not sin against You!***" (Ps. 119:11).

Forgetting an instruction is likely to make you fall into sin, and make you forget those principles and values which you wanted to learn. Therefore the Lord says: "*And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart.*" (Deut. 6:6). All this is so that you won't forget them.

Do the same in regard to your spiritual training, so that you do not forget it either.

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Being a disciple means that you gain knowledge which is then transposed, through your practising various spiritual exercises, into a stage of being practically applied.

By practising such exercises you will be putting what you have learned constantly before your eyes, and it will warn you whenever you are likely to break your new pattern of thought, or behaviour and fall back into old ways.

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Discipleship of Life.

In your discipleship you do not learn from the words of your teachers, but from their behaviour and way of life. Even when they say nothing, you still absorb their way of living, by absorbing the good qualities, standards and patterns which they demonstrate in their life.

The ear is not the only means of learning, the eye is too.

There is the story of St Snba Shishoi who was so humble that he would not give any instruction to those who came wanting to be his pupils. When the fathers criticised him for not giving any guidance to a new brother whom they had sent to learn from him, he said to them: 'I am neither a leader nor a teacher. But if that young man wishes to learn something, then if there is

anything that I can teach him, let him look at how I behave, and how I act, and let him do likewise, without my having to instruct him.'

A case of learning from the example of someone's life, is that of the three brothers who visited Anba Antonius. Two of them asked him questions, while the third sat silent. When the saint asked the silent one why he had not asked about anything, the brother replied: **'It is enough for me just to look at your face, Father.'**

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Just looking at the face of the saint was enough for the brother to learn a lesson from him, even without that holy man saying a word to him. He saw how the saint spoke and answered and observed his gentle, kind and humble features... and he learned. As another example we have the occasion when Pope Theophilus visited the desert of Shihit. The fathers said to St Anba Paphnuti: 'Say something to help the Pope.' And he replied to them: 'If he has not been able to benefit from my silence, then it is unlikely that he will be helped by my words, either.'

So in fact one should be a disciple of silence as much as of beneficial words.

Perhaps one of the best examples of this is that of St Arsanius the Great, from whose silence many learned as disciples, and from whose good model of behaviour many profited more than from the words of other teachers.

So a disciple now can learn from the lives of others, from the beautiful qualities that they exhibit. He can absorb their virtues without their actually giving him lessons in those virtues. This is what St Anba Antonius did at the beginning of his monastic life. He used to learn from the life of the hermits by observing them.

He was like a bee which sucks nectar from every flower.

From one recluse he learned calmness, from another humility, and from a third silence, and from a fourth how to speak well.

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What St Antonius did reminds me of another useful piece of teaching.

In your discipleship do not try to be just like a carbon copy of one particular person. For there isn't a single human being in whom all the virtues are to be found. Also, what suits one person's particular character, may not suit yours at all. So just take from everyone those beautiful qualities in him which you admire. And take as much of those qualities as you feel is right for you and in whatever way suits your character, your mentality and situation.

This, then, is being a disciple of life, and part of that is being a disciple of the lives of the saints.

St. Paul says about this: *"Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of [their] conduct."* (Heb. 13:7).

The Bible presents us with practical examples of every type, just as history presents us with other examples of every branch of virtue, and of every different style of life, so that we can learn from them.

The Lord Jesus Christ reproached the Jews with the example of the Queen of the South, when He said to them:

"The queen of the South will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and indeed a greater than Solomon [is] here." (Matt. 12:42).

She was a surprising example of one who sought wisdom and knowledge, in other words, of discipleship. She learned from a man who had been given wisdom by God Himself, and who was the wisest of his generation. (1 Kings 3:12). Therefore, this queen became an example for us to copy.

The Lord told parables and gave examples to His generation and to us, from which we can learn.

There was, for instance, the humility of the Syro-Phoenician woman, when she said of herself and her daughter: "*yet even the little dogs under the table eat from the children's crumbs.*" (Mark 7:28).

And the Lord also gave us the example of the faith of the centurion, who said: "*Lord, I am not worthy that You should come under my roof. But only speak a word, and my servant will be healed.*" (Matt. 8:8). Then the Lord said to those who were following Him: "*Assuredly, I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!*" (Matt. 8:10).

This, then, was how the Lord provided the people with actual examples from those living around them, and who were good models for others to learn from.

The Lord Jesus also told them the parable of the widow who gave all that she had out of her poverty, (Mark 12:44) and that of the woman who poured a jar of expensive perfume over His head, at the house of Simon the Leper. And He said:

"Assuredly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in

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the whole world, what this woman has done will also be told as a memorial to her." (Mark 14:9).

So there are examples from which you can learn not only in the lives of the saints who have passed over, but there are also living examples around you.

Perhaps you may find in those with whom you associate and mix, and in those who live in your generation, even if you haven't actually had any personal dealing with them, good examples from which you can pick up or absorb or imitate their virtues.

We see in children an example of those who learn by imitation.

Children have not yet reached a level of intellectual maturity and understanding which will help them to learn about the world or comprehend advice, but they live as those around them live. They absorb life, religion and everything else around them by unquestioning acceptance, not by teaching.

Just as you learn from people's virtues, you can also learn from their faults.

If you see something that is not right, and notice its awful consequences, and its repercussions on others, you can learn a lesson from it by making sure that you avoid that mistake in your own life. Or, like when the lion said, 'Who taught you wisdom, Mr Fox?' and the fox replied: 'I learned it from the head of the wolf as it flew from its dead body!'

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And then there is that lovely proverb: 'I learned silence from the parrot', which means that when we see the disadvantages of talking too much, we learn a lesson about the superiority and benefit of keeping quiet, and how people have more respect for those who do not talk too much.

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Lessons to be learned from Death.

You learn not only from life, but also from death. It is the old professor for you, and for many others.

Many of the fathers have learned from death the lessons of being detached, of the transitoriness of the world and the futility of all desires. The depth of this feeling has led some of them to monastic life and to renouncing the world altogether.

An example of such people was the great Anba Antonius.

He looked at his father when the latter lay motionless on his deathbed, and addressed him saying: 'Where is your strength, your greatness and your wealth? You have departed from the world against your will. But I shall willingly depart from it, before they can take me away reluctantly'.

Thus St. Antonius resolved to lead a monastic life. And with this feeling in his heart, he was moved by the verse which he had heard in church. (Matt. 19:21) *"If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven."*

And St Anba Paul, the first of the anchorites, was also affected by death.

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He had been on his way to the court to carry out a lawsuit against a relative over a matter of inheritance, when on the way he had seen a funeral procession. He was so deeply affected by it, that he left the money and the lawsuit, and went to the desert to try and save his soul.

Then there is the story of the advice which a brother heard from St Macarius the Great.

St Macarius had said to the young man: 'Go and praise the dead'. And the young man had gone and said to them: 'O righteous ones, O faithful saints...' and then returned and the saint had asked him: 'Did they make any reply to you?' To which the young man replied, 'No, not at all'. So the saint said to him: 'Then go and criticise them', which the young man duly did. The saint then asked: 'And did they make any reply to you this time? Were they upset by your condemnation of them?' To which the young man replied, 'No, not at all.' At which point the saint said: 'This is how you must be, then, if you wish to be a monk. Be like these dead souls. Do not rejoice at praise and do not be sad at being disapproved of.'

And there is the story of how St Macarius once went to sleep having placed a skull under his head.

Some of the saints used to benefit spiritually from the sight of skulls, from seeing the dead, and from visiting tombs. In fact, merely the mention of death used to benefit them. And to meditate upon it was a spiritual lesson for them.

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It was said about Alexander the Great, the most outstanding leader and emperor of his times, that he had commissioned a servant of his to say to him every day: 'Remember that you are a human being, and that one day you must die.'

I wish that you too would benefit every time you hear of a death, and from every funeral you attend, and that you would learn from those upon whom death has had a deep effect, and take from them a useful lesson in setting your priorities in life.

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Discipleship from Books.

The basis of discipleship is learning from the fathers and teachers. As the poet said: "Take knowledge from those who possess it, but seek wisdom from the wise."

But what happens if you don't find a teacher, father or guide? Then, in that case, there are books, in which everything can be found and which can provide you with good guidance.

Origen, the greatest scholar of his age, learned from books.

It was said that he used to hire whole libraries and spend the night there, reading all night, eagerly devouring the treasures of knowledge to be found in the manuscripts. St Jerome said of him, that: 'He used to read while he ate, and read while he walked ... until his mind was full of knowledge.' But Origen was harmed by some of what he read.

Nowadays, we remember the name of Habib Girgis who, on finding no teacher in the Theological College who could teach him knowledge, especially after the illness and decease of the archpriest Philotheus Ibrahim, resorted to books and eagerly consumed their information. This enabled him to become the first teacher of theology of his generation, and to write various book son doctrine, spirituality, the lives of the saints, and textbooks for church teaching and religious instruction. His only source of learning was books.

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However, a person must choose carefully the books which he reads and from which he learns, and must read them selectively and not embrace unquestioningly all of what he reads.

For there are books, even by famous writers, which may contain incorrect information. not all books are infallible. The reader must keep before his mind what St Paul said: "*Test all things; hold fast what is good.*" (1 Thes. 5:21). And also the words of St John: "*.. do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God;*" (1 John 4:1).

A person also needs to distinguish between just reading, and actually putting into practice what he is reading about.

There are certain spiritual principles for which one needs guidance in knowing how to put them into practice. And some virtues might also require a step by step approach and gradual progression over a long period of time, in order for you to put them into full effect. Someone might read in the book 'Bustan al-Ruhban' about a virtue which one of the saints mastered, perhaps only after struggling for years to do so, but it doesn't necessarily follow that the reader can suddenly take that knowledge and use it as his starting point, the stage reached by that saint only after years of striving. He will not reach that point or acquire that same virtue unless he follows the gradual progress and spiritual struggle, one stage at a time, which the saint had experienced.

The same applies to the various stages of prayer, and the practice of silence, fasting and seclusion, and similar matters

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for which one needs spiritual guidance in order to be able to master them.

We thank God that the Coptic library is well-stocked at present with valuable books, whether they are the sayings of the fathers in translation, or the lives of the saints, or books on spirituality, doctrine, or history of Christian ritual and various other aspects of Christian knowledge.

The individual must choose something that will fill his heart and mind.

He would do well to draw up a daily programme of reading, or at least a weekly one, so that if he doesn't read enough one day he can make up for it the next.

Anyone engaged in the teaching ministry personally needs to read a great deal, in order to be able to satisfy his pupils, and so that he won't just present them with a repetition of facts, or superficial knowledge, or things which they already know. The minister whose knowledge is deep, will be seen as a rich source of information by his pupils, who will then want to come to him and his lessons. He will not be able to instruct them unless he has first been through the stages of being a pupil and has gone deeply into his studies. As the proverb puts it: **'Be filled; because no one can overflow unless he is full.'** **Learning from books has two sides to it: knowing it in one's mind, and living it in one's life. And in order to integrate**

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what you have read, you have to practise spiritual exercises.

Read and make sure that you fully understand. And extract those spiritual concepts which are most beneficial and appropriate for you. Write them down in a personal notebook, so that you can remind yourself of them from time to time. Discipline yourself to do them, and be responsible for practising them. Watch yourself as you apply them. If you fall short in your spiritual knowledge into your way of life.

In talking about books and the scholar Origen, we can mention St Basil the great and St Gregory, who pronounced on the divinities, who were both disciples of Origen.

Although they were not his contemporaries, since they lived in the following century, nevertheless, we can say that because they learned from his books, they were his disciples, in the same way as the Jews referred to themselves when they spoke to the man who had been born blind saying: *"we are Moses' disciples."* (John 9:28). Yet obviously they had not lived at the same time as the prophet Moses, but having studied the five books which Moses wrote, which are called the Pentateuch (the law of Moses), they felt entitled to call themselves his disciples. You will no doubt have come across many good and kind people. But have you benefited from them and from their example? Believe me, God will judge us on the last day if we have not taken full advantage of learning from those whom He

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has sent to us as exemplars, whom we should imitate, just as He said about those who were His contemporaries when He lived on earth: *"The queen of the South will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and indeed a greater than Solomon [is] here."* (Matt. 12:42).

Perhaps you might hear or read about the virtue of gentleness, but not understand it exactly. Then God sends you a gentle-tempered person from whose peaceful, kind behaviour you learn by watching, and in this way you understand more about what it is to be gentle than you would from explanations in books.

So the Lord sends us living examples for every virtue: for humility, simplicity, holy zeal, faith, and for all those spiritual matters which books are unable to explain precisely, and which might carry a wider meaning than words or expressions could convey. And if we don't learn from such models and God were to ask: 'Why didn't you learn from these practical examples?!',

then "every mouth may be stopped," (Rom. 3:19).

Did you imagine that being a disciple was only a matter of reading books, listening to sermons and receiving spiritual guidance? No, far from it! There is also learning from others who do not speak about virtues, but whose virtues speak for them.

So learn a lesson from every virtue which you see in someone else, whoever he might be, Christian, minister or lay person...

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But let us go on now to another branch of discipleship which is learning from Nature.

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Learning from Nature.

I always tend to remember the words of the psalm, when I talk about Nature:

"The heavens declare the glory of God; And the firmament shows His handiwork. " (Psalm 19:1).

This is indeed what Nature declares, which is why the Reciter continues his reflections in this psalm: " *Day unto day utters speech, And night unto night reveals knowledge.* " (Psalm 19:2).

So a human being, then, can listen to what Nature is saying, to the words of the celestial sphere, But what lessons can we learn from Nature? I will mention some lessons here:

1. Nature gives us a lesson in order and intricacy.

In the forefront of this there is that wonderful, exact order which holds together the sun, moon, stars and planets. How does the earth revolve around its axis, its regular 24 hour cycle, which gives rise to day and night, and also its other cycle around the sun each year which produces the four seasons? All this has been going on with such regularity, without losing any balance, for thousands of years. Thus it is that one can forecast

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what will happen after hours, days or months, with regard to the air pressure, wind, rain, or temperature, or flow of the tides.

One can observe the pattern or times and seasons operating according to the precise order of Nature, that is a lesson for us.

Another example of order and intricacy are the various systems of the human body.

I mean those systems as God originally created them to be, not how human beings have abused them by neglect, or how they have sometimes become damaged through illness, disease or accidents.

These systems are, in fact, very delicate and very precisely arranged, whether it is the action of the heart, or the blood system in the human body, or the function of the brain in all its centres, or the digestive or nervous systems etc. etc..

Consider the eye as an intricate and complex organ, and the ear as a hearing system, and the tongue as an organ of taste and speech, and an aid to digestion. One can only say that they are a wonder upon wonder. Therefore it is not so surprising that in the past, they used to study medicine in colleges of theology, because it gave an idea of God's ability to create.

2. Let us take another example from Nature, which is the way that it works tirelessly, without wearying, and without asking for rest.

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Just imagine if the earth leaned over to rest on its axis, and asked for a break, even for a little while, from the labour of this unceasing revolving! What confusion it would cause to the light and dark?! But the earth never ever ceases its work, nor does the moon or the other members of the celestial sphere, the sun, stars and planets. The movement is constant; an amazing activity, performed for the purpose of carrying out its mission faithfully. All this, of course, holds lessons for us.

3. Nature gives us a third lesson, in that it acts for the sake of others, and that it carries out another's will, with complete obedience and devotion.

What actual benefit would Nature get for itself from all that it does? What benefit does water derive from evaporating with the heat and rising up, then being condensed as rain and falling down? And this rising and falling goes on continuously every season of every year for the sake of something else.

The whole of Nature works in the service of others. Nature itself has no existence as far as its work is concerned. It just gives itself freely and that is it. It obeys the law which God laid down for it and doesn't shy away from it, or argue about it.

What on earth would happen if the stars called a meeting, to debate their plan of work the coming year?! Or if they demanded a rearrangement of their affairs, or if they protested

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against having to work constantly without ever having a break or a holiday?!

Whoever does this sort of thing could be classed, perhaps, as someone who is too impressed with their own intellectual ability, who is in too much of a rush to look clever, and whose mind has grown bored. Such a person is one who isn't learning a lesson from Nature, and who isn't carrying out what he says, when he prays to God: "*Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*" (Matt. 6:10).

4. Nature gives us a fourth lesson, in cooperation and teamwork.

All of Nature works together to perform one task. It will be enough for us to take as an example what happens when a person eats a meal. This is one operation in which you find out how everything works together. There is the hand which puts the food into the mouth, the teeth which chew it, and the tongue which helps you swallow it and which pushes it down the back of the throat to the oesophagus and on to the stomach. Then comes the various secretions, from one part or another, which extract any goodness from the food which is then changed into blood tissues or energy, with the waste being expelled from the body by the bowels. Each organ and every system of the body works with the others for the well being of the whole body, with remarkable cooperation; receiving from one organ to pass on to another, and working in partnership with each other. So that we can never say in the end, 'Which part did that?', because it was the whole digestive system which

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carried it out. But that's not all, because even if the process were attributed to the digestive system alone, there are still the other systems which are involved too, like the heart and the brain.

We also find the same cooperation between the temperature of the weather, the winds, rains and plants. All work together for the sake of a healthy purpose, which is to benefit the whole.

One cannot isolate part of Nature to work on its own. We find the same cooperation in the ant world and the bee kingdom, but I don't have enough time to talk about the wonderful way in which these creatures play their different roles.

Shouldn't we learn this lesson from Nature, along with another which the Bible tells us:

5. " If one member suffers, all the members suffer with [it]; " (1 Cor. 12:26).

All it takes is for one organ to be in pain, and you find the whole nervous system intervening. You find the feeling of pain appears and perhaps alarm signals start ringing to motivate the person towards healing. It might be that he develops a raised temperature, an irregular heartbeat, high blood pressure or headache etc... which calls out: 'There is illness here, heal it!'

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If a germ has entered the body, you find the white blood cells in constant -motion, and the whole immune system preparing to fight it... beside the brain and other organs coming to its aid.

The apostle went on to say: "*.. if one member is honoured, all the members rejoice with [it].* " (1 Cor. 12:26). The face smiles, the heart is at rest, the nerves are calm, the hands and feet are ready to serve and express their joy. It is a lesson that Nature gives us of the feelings shared by one family.

6. Nature's sixth lesson to us is that it acts without being influenced by what people think about it.

The rain descends at its proper time and performs its task, without being influenced by the praise of the farmer that his fields have been watered, or by the grumbling of the person who has been rained upon, or the hut that has fallen because of the strength of the downpour or the clothes that have been soaked. The rain does not seek false glory, thus it is affected neither by praise nor by condemnation. It just carries out its duty faithfully.

In the same way, the sun, the heat and cold and the winds perform their functions without being concerned whether anyone praises them because he is happy with what they have done, or objects because he is annoyed. To perform their duty is all that they are concerned about.

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7. The seventh lesson which we can learn from Nature is that of wisdom.

Look at the vine, for example: it sheds its leaves in winter, in order to give you the chance to enjoy the rays of the sun under its trellis. Then in summer it is clothed in leaves once again, because you then need shade to protect you from the heat. We could also mention as a similar example, the pansiana tree (the kind that gives shade) and many other types which shed their leaves.

It is also part of Nature's wisdom that many plants and fruits appear at the best time, and the right time, for human beings.

The watermelon appears in summer, for it is then that you need to quench your thirst by its juice, because of the heat. And the orange appears in winter, for it is then that you need the vitamin C which it contains, to ward off colds. In the same way, one could cite the cases of many of the fruits as a point for reflection on how they appear according to Nature's wisdom, as to what is their appropriate time.

8. The eighth lesson we can learn from Nature is that of self denial.

We can learn this lesson from the roots, for example, which crouch beneath the earth without appearing, yet it is them that bear the whole weight of the tree. And the higher the tree

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grows, the more the roots branch out and bury themselves in the earth, so that by their burrowing further and further they can give the tree the chance to grow higher and higher. Would you call that self-sacrifice or love, an expression of humility, self-denial or service to others, or all of that put together? For that is what it is...

Let us just imagine what would happen if the roots were suddenly overcome with feelings of jealousy, and started to envy the trunk, the boughs, the branches and the leaves, because of their appearance, and because of the admiration they receive from people. And suppose the roots wanted to be like those other parts of the tree..! Suppose they wanted to leave the earth and rise up out of their hiding place to be above the ground, like the branches, dancing in the air ?! And if that happened, the whole tree would fall down, wouldn't it!? But we thank God that the roots don't behave like that, that they are humble, and steadfast in their humility, and do not envy.

We can learn the same lesson from the foundations of building.

People like to admire a towering building for its impressive structure, its height, decoration, its lights and furnishings etc. etc.. But no one speaks about its foundations, hidden below the ground, which support the whole building in self denial. They perform their supportive role unnoticed and unacclaimed. The higher the building rises, the further down the foundations need to go. The foundation seeks no praise, but only the safety of the building that appears above. It is quite content to be deep down.

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9. Nature provides us with a ninth lesson, on the different variety of virtues.

As we have seen, the question of virtue is not confined to one thing, as if there were only one kind of virtue; it is rather like a bouquet of different coloured flowers. While flowers make you think of beauty and giving, fruit can make you think of how fruit grows only to sacrifice itself for the life of others, and of how other fruits give themselves for people's health and healing. And there are those fruits which don't mind being made to have a bitter taste, because then they can have health giving properties.

10. Some parts of Nature give us a tenth lesson, one in strength and resistance.

As an example of this, we have the hills and mountains, which are firmly fixed and never move, no matter how much the winds blow and the rains fall. They stand upright, unshaken, no matter what man burrows into them, or digs roads on them, or builds on them. Another example is that of the huge stone which stands in the course of the river, which are buffeted by the water and waves, yet which stand firm, taking no notice of shocks and remaining unaffected by them.

11. Sometimes we can learn from Nature a lesson in acclimatising oneself to one's environment.

There are desert plants, which find no water and whose leaves are not exposed to any vapour, rain or dew, which are enfolded in prickles furthermore, but which nevertheless retain their

moisture, and do not lose their water. Another example is that of the Arctic fox and wolf which have a particular type of fur coat to protect them from the cold, while racehorses have quite a different type of skin because they do not live in a cold climate. Can't we also learn from this another lesson, on how God cares for His creatures? No doubt we can..

12. The prickles mentioned in the previous section remind us that all things work together for good, which is a lesson in faith.

A famous writer once made a wise remark when he said: 'Even thorns can be used to make good fertiliser for the field'!! There is nothing strange about that, for when thorns or prickles are burned they turn into compost, and that particular compost can make good fertilizer and is useful to man, besides the other advantage of burning it, which is the heat that it generates, which can also be put to good use. This gives us yet another lesson which is, that we should make full use of everything, even things like prickles which at first sight might seem to be rather harmful.

13. Another lesson, one in humility, can be learned from the cycle of the clouds and the rain.

Water evaporates and dries and rises up to become clouds. Even so, it doesn't forget its origin, which is down below in the lowest level of the earth. Therefore it is humble, knowing that its rise will not go on forever, that a time will come when it

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will get cold and become dense, and that the wind will blow and it will fall to the ground, perhaps to be absorbed by the roots of a tree and to be taken down under the earth.

Would you expect the clouds to be proud of their water, knowing where it had come from and knowing its fate?!

On the other hand, should the water be afflicted with feelings of inferiority, or belittle itself, remembering its fellow drops of water which had evaporated and risen up?!

No, not at all. Both should be content with their situation, whether God made it rise to the sky or descend to the earth, or whether He caused it to be absorbed by the roots of a tree or enter the veins of its leaves and branches.

This is also a lesson in the life of acceptance.

14. We can also learn from the case of the manure which is used to fertilise the soil.

A person might look at manure as something offensive because of its rotten smell and unattractive appearance, yet the manure itself is quite content to be as it is, and God who created it is quite able to change it. For it might become part of the food which a tree absorbs to be carried along to feed its buds and then turn into fruits, which a person eats and which then goes to build up that person's body and become part of its tissues.

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I wonder if people would be more humble if they were to realise that some of their tissues had, once upon a time, been manure in the earth?!

These are spiritual lessons for all who wish to learn and reflect. It reminds me of what the Lord said: "*Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones,*" (Matt. 18:10).

15. We can learn another lesson about the care God takes and His concern, which is made clear by the Lord's words: "*Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither*

toil nor spin; and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, [will] [He] not much more [clothe] you, O you of little faith? " (Matt. 6:28-30).

This teaches us that we should not worry about what we need, for God cares about us and knows what we need before we ask. In actual fact, when God placed Adam in the Garden of Eden, He put him in a place which was full of spiritual benefits to anyone who might contemplate them. God gave Adam the right to be master over the earth and bring it under his submission. (Gen. 1:26, 28). **But, it would have been more useful to him to have contemplated it and learned from it, rather than to have dominated it!**

Let us now move on to another aspect of the sources of discipleship which is, learning from the animal world.

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Learning from the Animal World.

Our Lord gave us this principle when He said: "*... be wise as serpents and harmless as doves. " (Matt. 10:16).* He was teaching us that we should learn simplicity and innocence from doves, and wisdom from serpents, which is a symbol or suggestion that we should be prepared to learn even from the birds and from the things that crawl upon the earth.

Believe me, I've learned many lessons from the sparrows!

I was sitting before my cell in the monastery garden once, and there were a few seeds on the ground which might have been dropped by one of the farm workers. A sparrow came to feed on the seeds, and I imagined that it would eat until it had had its fill from this source of provision. But it took one or two seeds and flew off, leaving all this goodness behind without minding or regretting it.

And so I learned a lesson from this about frugality and being satisfied with what one has, and in fact about detachment as well. And I remembered what the Lord had said: "*... they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; " (Matt. 6:26).* This sparrow didn't greedily covet or consume its pile of material blessings, nor did it stand in guard beside it, but rather took what it needed and flew away,

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happier to sing in the sky than to sit beside the stuff on the ground. And in that there was another useful lesson for me.

The bird sang happily after leaving everything behind...

I said to myself: 'This little sparrow is more of a real monk than I. It is more detached from the world, because it does all this naturally of its own accord, without straining or making an effort, or having to resist inner feelings. Its nature is to be happy, in spite of the fact that little traps sometimes await it. And I recalled the words of the apostle: "*Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice! " (Phil. 4:4).*

The sparrow also taught me a lesson in the life of trust, because it had left behind its supply of grain and flown off, trusting absolutely that wherever it went, it would find the food it needed, without having to worry about anything. And here I also remembered what our Lord said: "*.. do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. " (Matt. 6:34) and ".. do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink.." (Matt. 6:26).* And then I recalled what he said

about the sparrows: " ... for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. " (Matt. 6:26).

Dear Lord, it is a fact that these sparrows are better than many people, for the way they trust You. Yet You, out of Your great love for us, and to encourage us weak ones, said something which makes us feel ashamed of ourselves when we realise what little faith we have in comparison to the

sparrows, which was: "Are you not of more value than they?" (Matt. 6:26).

Thus we learn from them the life of faith, of not being worried about material things, and not being anxious about tomorrow. You Yourself, O Lord, told us to look at the birds of the sky and learn. Perhaps you meant that we are more precious than they from the point of view of being creatures endowed with a mind and spirit and made in the image and likeness of God, though the birds are superior to us in their reliance on You!!

Something else that amazes me about the sparrow is its independent spirit and love of freedom.

It amazes me how it never ties itself to one particular spot, for instance, the place where it finds food, which is why I said in my poem, 'The travelling Hermit'.

"I have no monastery for a home,
all the desert and hills are my abode.
I am a bird soaring in the air,
no passion for a nest have I.
In the world I am free,
free to travel or stay."

We can also learn a lesson on activity from the ant. The book of Proverbs tells us: "*Go to the ant, you sluggard! Consider her ways and be wise,* " (Prov. 6:6).

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I can state with complete confidence that I have never in my life seen an ant keep still! They never ever stop. They run constantly here and there. And as the Bible says: "*.. Provides her supplies in the summer, [And] gathers her food in the harvest.* " (Prov. 6:8), which is a wonderful lesson in activity and movement.

The bee also gives us a lesson on organisation and order.

The bee kingdom, as that prince of poets Ahmad Shawqi put it, is: .. an ordered kingdom, with a female in command: the burden of rule borne by the workers and labourers."

What is so wonderful here is the orderliness of the bee kingdom, whether it is in the distribution of work, or making the beeswax so beautifully, or collecting the nectar and making the honey, or making the food for the queen (which we humans steal and which can be bought in pharmacies under the name of Royal Jelly). And what could be more wonderful than the honeycomb which the bees make, which has such amazing health-giving properties, and how about the many books and articles that have been written? And, after all, wasn't it the food of John the Baptist?!

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Learning from Christian Rites and Ritual.

All the rites and rituals which the church has laid down, have spiritual benefits for whomever likes to reflect and learn from them. It is because of this that we find children and illiterate or uneducated people benefiting from them, even if their mental or

intellectual level is not up to understanding the beliefs or even grasping fully the meanings of the prayers. It is not only they, but all the congregation who reap spiritual benefits from the rituals.

They benefit from all that they see, the candles, incense, icons, the priests' robes etc. etc. In fact, they even benefit from watching the priests' gestures, and from being in their presence, or from being in the sanctuary.

The congregation also benefit spiritually from the standing and sitting during the services, from looking at the priests' vestments and the crosses, and from the steps which give access to higher levels.

They may see a candle illuminating a picture of a saint.

Thereby they recall that saint's life story, and profit from it.

They see how the church honours him with its lights, and know that he must be benefiting the church and worthy of veneration.

For thus God honours those who honour Him. And the light of

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the candle reminds people of how that saint used to give light like that candle.

But in order to shed light like a candle, that saint had to withdraw and melt away as he gave light.

This is how people can gain a lesson in self-sacrifice for the love of God, and in the service of others.

They might also feel that the saint is still alive and has not died.

They may talk to him and ask his prayers on their behalf, and speak to him as if he were there with them. Thus they gain an idea of the relationship between the church that strives on earth, and its members who have striven before and passed on. In all of this, without their being aware of it, the belief in eternity becomes firmly established in them, and they repeat inside them the words of the priest in the prayer: "... because there is no death for your servants but only a passing on." So these are things which one can learn just from a candle and a picture.

Those whose perceptions go deeper, will notice that the candle gives light because of the grease in the wax, and a lamp in the church sheds light because of the oil which it burns, and this wax or oil can be seen as a symbol of the Holy Spirit.

Therefore they see that all the good we do doesn't stem so much from any innate goodness in us, but rather from the

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action of the Spirit in us. And they recall the importance of the oil in the story of the wise and foolish virgins.

In the same way, people can learn other lessons from the candles which are held up at the reading of the gospel, and those used in the church and at the altar in general.

They might then remember the words of the psalm: "*Your word is a lamp to my feet And a light to my path.*" (Ps. 119:105).

Also, "*The commandment of the Lord [is] pure, enlightening the eyes;*" (Ps. 19:8).

They will see that the church, with its lights, is like heaven, and that these lights remind us of the angels, and that the faithful, "... shall shine Like the brightness of the firmament, ... Like the stars forever and ever." (Dan. 12:3).

The white vestments of the priests remind the worshippers of the purity of the priesthood, and that priests are the angels of the church. (Rev. 2:3). They remind them of those who dwell in heaven, who appear in the book of Revelation, as those in robes which had been whitened in the blood of the Lamb. (Rev.

7:13-14).

Then there are the steps which the priests ascend to the sanctuary which remind the people of the sanctity of the altar and its deep significance and elevation, and the exalted position of its ministers.

This is why people remove their shoes out of respect, when they enter the sanctuary, because they are conscious of its

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holiness, and because the place in which the deacons and ministers move, is higher than that of the congregation, whilst the altar area is the highest of all.

When the incense rises up, it gives off a purifying scent, which reminds people of those pure prayers which rise to heaven.

I do not have the time to talk about all the rites and rituals of the church in detail, it would require whole books to do so, but they all contain something upon which one can reflect and learn, alongside the readings and tunes used in worship.

It is enough to say that whoever enters a church with a contemplative spirit, will leave it in a stronger spiritual state, having been affected by the lessons which he has received from the rituals.

Just the sight of the church might well lead one to think of Noah's Ark and how the children of God were saved in it, or it might remind one of heaven, with all its angels and lights. The belfry of a church which rises up into the sky can remind a person, before he enters the church, that he too should raise his eyes and direct them upwards.

Whoever wishes to be a disciple, will find in the rites and rituals of the church, a rich source from which to learn.

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Learning from Things that Happen.

Every event that takes place bears deep within it a useful lesson for anyone who wishes to profit from experiences in life, and who desires to be a disciple. It is not only the righteous who profit, but also those who don't believe. All can learn from what goes on in the world.

When King Xerxes read the book of the chronicles, the record of his reign, his soul was influenced by what he read. And that proved to be the reason for the salvation of the entire people. (Esther ch.6). Events inspired certain feelings, which led to spiritually-guided actions in those who were influenced by them.

I wish that we too would reflect on how the hand of God acts in all that happens to us, and around us, both as individuals and as groups.

We can learn about God by seeing how He acts, how and when He intervenes, how He changes bad into good, and how He arranges the affairs of the world in wisdom, combining the freedom which He gives to man, with divine determination, which sets up justice on earth.

We can learn lessons from God's care and concern, from God's justice, and from His patience and long-sufferings.

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The prophet David recorded events which happened in his day. He sang about them in the Psalms. And the Israelites sang of them in their national songs in the Book of Jashar. (2 Sam. 1:18), and see also, (Joshua 10:13). These were lessons for the people, as were the events which Joshua sang about.

So think over, and meditate on all the things that happen to you.

Learn from these experiences, and keep the lessons in your heart, just as it was said about the Virgin Mary, that she "*kept all these things in her heart.*" (Luke 2:51). And do not forget these reminders you have been given, for they are like the specific commemorations which the Lord God instituted for special events, in order that the people would not forget them, such as the stones which they put in the midst of the river Jordan, so that the Israelites would not forget that it had once parted to let them cross (Joshua 4:9).

There is the story of the crossing of the Red Sea, and the story of the three young men in the fiery furnace, which the Church includes in the midnight prayer, so that we sing of them everyday, and can learn a lesson in faith, and a lesson in how God cares and protects. And there are, of course, other stories apart from these two.

What are the events which we read about in the Synaxarium everyday, if not other lessons which we can learn from?

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They are recited to us so that we can learn from them, and so that we can see how God worked, and how the saints acted. There are also other stories in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, which we hear in the Mass, which have the same objective, together with stories from the lives of the saints. Blessed is he who profits from the lessons contained in all these events.

You could also say that we have lessons from history, when we learn from something that happened in the past, and lessons from current events that we have seen with our own eyes or heard of.

But if we let events go by without learning any lessons from them, then without doubt we are failing in our discipleship.

Even non-believers find something worthy of consideration in events that take place, by which I mean lessons which they could learn from and use to their advantage, whether these things happen to them or to others, a friend or enemy. The poet said: "Whoever is conscious of history within him, adds years to his life."

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Learning from a Spiritual Father.

Happy is the person who has a spiritual father who is on the level of giving him spiritual guidance. What this means is, a father confessor who not only listens to him and recites the absolution, but who also guides and teaches him, and explains the spiritual road, and who gives his spiritual son or daughter, in his or her confession, the gift of discernment and discretion.

This kind of father is a teacher who has studied the spiritual path and experienced it, who has studied the human soul and come to know its weaknesses, its impulses, its tendencies and what motivates it. And he will also have studied the attacks of the devil and the tricks, cunning and deceptions of evil spirits and knew how to overcome them.

From such a father, one can learn as a disciple.

If there is no one like this available, then the one who needs to confess should try to find a spiritual guide, besides the father confessor, whom he can ask about how he should

conduct himself in his spiritual life. The father confessor is supposed to be the spiritual guide because the soul of his son or daughter is revealed to him, but if he does not have this gift for giving guidance, or his time is too limited, to give adequate guidance to the hundreds of those who would come to confess, because of his other responsibilities, then necessity dictates that

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anyone who needs to confess, should try to find himself a suitable guide. He will need to find a person upon whose advice and encouragement he can rely, and who will reveal to him what is hidden from his knowledge, so that he does not walk blindly in the fog.

I have given to my sons the priests, many lectures about how to be a father confessor, which I am hoping to publish soon as a book.

In connection with learning as a disciple from a spiritual father or guide, I have a few observations to make:

1. The guide must be secure in his belief, sound in his directives and guidance, and he should be experienced, otherwise it will be as the Bible says: "*... if the blind leads the blind, both will fall into a ditch.*" (Matt. 15:14). This is the situation which our Lord criticised in relation to the Scribes and Pharisees, when He said that they were "*blind guides*". (Matt. 23:16,24). And when He rebuked them saying: "*For you travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.*" (Matt. 23:15).

2. If the father or guide should go astray or deviate from his correct position, he ought not to be obeyed, nor should his guidance be accepted. So a person should seek guidance, but at the same time keep his eyes open, and make sure that his conscience feels comfortable with the advice that he receives.

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And the father or guide should not be content just to give directions, but should try to convince, and reinforce his teaching by verses from the Bible, or by stories and sayings of the saints.

3. There is nothing wrong with a person asking his teacher or guide or spiritual father about something. The disciples of our Lord Jesus Himself used to ask Him questions, and ask Him to explain things to them. And He, blessed be His holy name, used to interpret things for them and give them parables and mention some of the verses of the Scriptures and explain them (Luke 24:27).

If someone should ever find, though, that the advice given by his guide is contrary to the word of God, then he should remember what the Bible says: "*We ought to obey God rather than men.*" (Acts 5:29).

4. It is not a good idea for the son or daughter to try to be a copy of his or her spiritual father in everything. For what suits their father may not suit them at all. And perhaps their father's circumstances, capabilities, and psychology might be completely different from theirs. But what they should do is to take the principles and apply them, as far as they are able to spiritually, and in accordance with what is appropriate for them and best suits their character.

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5. At the same time, the spiritual guide should not try to cancel out the character of the one who follows him as a disciple. Nor should the guide make that person follow a

course against his or her will, which can happen if the guide doesn't take into consideration that person's circumstances, psychology and inclinations!!

If the spiritual guidance, for example, involves calmness and solitariness, he shouldn't put pressure on all his pupils to be like that, for some of them might be sociable in character, and prefer serving people and being with them, helping them and gaining benefit from them in doing so.

6. Also, a person can have more than one guide, So that he can ask them individually for guidance concerning whatever aspects of life they are particularly experienced in, providing he does not fall into any contradictions in the advice he is given. If this or something like this should happen, then he can take it as an area for questioning, study and finding out more information. He should also be prepared to confront one view with another, without embarrassment, and to do so without mentioning any names.

The saint Anba Antonius the Great used to take lessons from all the hermits around him, when he was starting out on his monastic life. He learned humility from one, silence from another, piety and asceticism from a third, how to pray and contemplate from a fourth and wisdom from a fifth etc. etc.

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7. A person might also need to make a step by step approach to the things that he learns from his guide, or from books. Since not all the virtues, which a person has convinced himself that he would like to master, are easy to put into practice.

It probably needs time, and a long time at that, because the soul is unaccustomed to practising this new virtue, and might put up opposition to it. It might also need a long time because of attacks by Satan, who always tries to obstruct those who are on the road to God, and these people might also encounter obstacles from their home life or from their surrounding environment, which hinder their progress on the spiritual road.

Something which one grasps easily, may just as easily be lost!

What is important is not that a person just practises a particular virtue, but that he makes it so firmly rooted in him that it becomes an integral part of his character. Therefore, every virtue which one does not persevere at acquiring over a period of time, is not likely to take root in one's life, and is liable to be inconsistent.

So it is not good for a person to jump rapidly along the spiritual road, and try to cover it too soon, but rather he should take it calmly and deliberately, in a balanced way, and he must take it one step at a time, until his footsteps are firm and steady, remembering the apostle's advice:

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" ... Not to think [of] [himself] more highly than he ought to think, ... " (Rom. 12:3). Nor must he go rushing to the next particular step, until he has mastered the one before. And he should not try to put pressure on his guide or spiritual father to allow him to go too quickly.

8. You should not consider your spiritual father merely as a means of implementing your spiritual desires! Don't present him with decisions that you have already made up your mind that you are going to carry out, but rather, present him with your desires, or better still, with suggestions, questions, or aspirations, so that he can tell you whether they are good for you or not. Do not press him to allow you to do something,

and do not get angry if he doesn't give you permission!. If you do, then the guidance given will be superficial, and in such a situation, you will become like someone following his own whims, just wanting his father to agree with him in order to give those whims or fancies spiritual legitimacy .

9. Before you go to seek spiritual guidance, you must pray that God will give your guide the right thoughts which will be most appropriate to your life. This means that you pray that God's will be done in your life, through the guidance of this father or guide, and that God will lead you to receive the guidance that He wants to give you, by guiding your spiritual father or guide in what advice to give to you.

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10. Realise that any virtues which you might practise according to your mood, may lead you to seek or feel a false sense of glory. This is why the fathers say in 'Bustan al-Ruhban': "If you find a young man climbing to heaven on the strength of his own fancies, pull him back down to earth." The point to watch here is that the person is acting according to his own understanding, and the Bible says: "*Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding...* " (Prov. 3:5).

The Bible also explains this matter in a verse which is repeated twice in close proximity in the same Book, which is: "*There is a way [that] [seems] right to a man, But its end [is] the way of death.* " (Prov. 14:12, 16:25).

A person might cling to that path which seems to him to be straight, but by doing so he might bring upon himself a lot of harm.

That road which appears to be so straight, might well be part of Satan's deception.

How often St Ishaq and St Ogris explained this very point, namely that one who adheres to his own way of thinking, who allows himself to be led by his desires or whims, may convince himself that the thought comes from God, and that it is the Spirit which has inspired him with this idea!

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11. But what a dangerous situation it is when someone says that he receives his knowledge directly from God, and that he learns directly from Christ!! Because of this, that person refuses to learn from others. And at the same time, he cannot be sure whether that thought which has come to him, is from God or not!.

The surprising thing is that people who have said that they have received knowledge directly from God, have not been prophets, nor of the twelve disciples. Nor have such people been able to say, as the apostle Paul said: "*For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: ...*" (1 Cor. 11:23).

12. Instruction from God may mean learning from divine sources. We learn from God through the Holy Bible. We learn from our Lord Jesus from His holy life. Even so, we need somebody to explain these books and these examples to us, and somebody to lead us on the spiritual path. Learning is not just theoretical understanding, as much as it is actually putting that new knowledge into practise.

13. If this were not the case, then why did God create teachers and guides?! Why did the Lord say to the disciples: "*Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, ... teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you;*" (Matt. 28:20), if it were possible for a person to learn directly from God!? And why does it tell us in the Bible: " And

He Himself gave some [to] [be] apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, " (Eph. 4:11).

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And why does it say: "Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, ... he who teaches, in teaching;" (Rom. 12:7) and that: "...For the lips of a priest should keep knowledge, And [people] should seek the law from his mouth;" (Mal. 2:7).

The phrase, "It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.', (John 6:45) we understand along with another verse, which is: "He who hears you hears Me, " (Luke 10:16) which takes this point further.

Whoever seeks to learn directly from God, or learn directly from Christ, probably lacks the humility to accept instruction from a teacher or guide, and has probably forgotten the words of the apostle: "Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, " (Heb. 13:7).

And he goes on to say: "Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you. " (Heb. 13:17).

St Paul praised his disciple Timothy, the bishop, saying: "But you have carefully followed my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith," (2 Tim. 3:10). If learning from a teacher were unnecessary, then Paul would just have advised Timothy that his instruction and way of life would come to him directly from God, wouldn't he?! And do we consider ourselves to be greater than St Timothy, who received his teaching from St Paul, the apostle? And also, why should St Paul say to the faithful believers: "Imitate me, just as I also [imitate] Christ. "

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(1 Cor. 11:1), and, "Brethren, join in following my example. " (Phil. 3:17).

14. The kind of thought or idea which rejects learning from the church, and which wants to learn directly from God, is not an orthodox one, nor is it one that is based on the gospels or the Bible. (By which I mean in the light of the Biblical texts which we have mentioned, and many others like them, which include all the verses which speak of teaching, spreading the gospel, guidance and preaching and the church's duty to instruct). However, in all the churches of the world different beliefs might exist. For example, one finds preachers and pulpits for preaching. None of this would be necessary, would it, if people learned directly from God?!

15. Dear brothers and sisters, the spiritual life calls for a humble heart, and in being a disciple there is humbleness.

Anyone who insists on learning directly from God, might run the risk of falling into pride. And pride can hand him over as an easy prey to Satan, who will give him whatever teaching he likes. All those who have ever invented new sects, and all heretics in the history of the Church, have refused to learn from the Church and instead followed their own ideas, imagining that those ideas were from God!!

16. How can you know if the thought which you imagine is from God, is really from God?! The book 'Bustan al-Ruhban' tells us that St Macarius the Great had the idea of

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visiting the anchorite fathers in the very heart of the desert, and this great saint said: "I fought that idea for three years to see if

it were from God or not!"

And there you are in all your naivety, imagining that you are learning directly from God, and that the Spirit said such and such to you!!

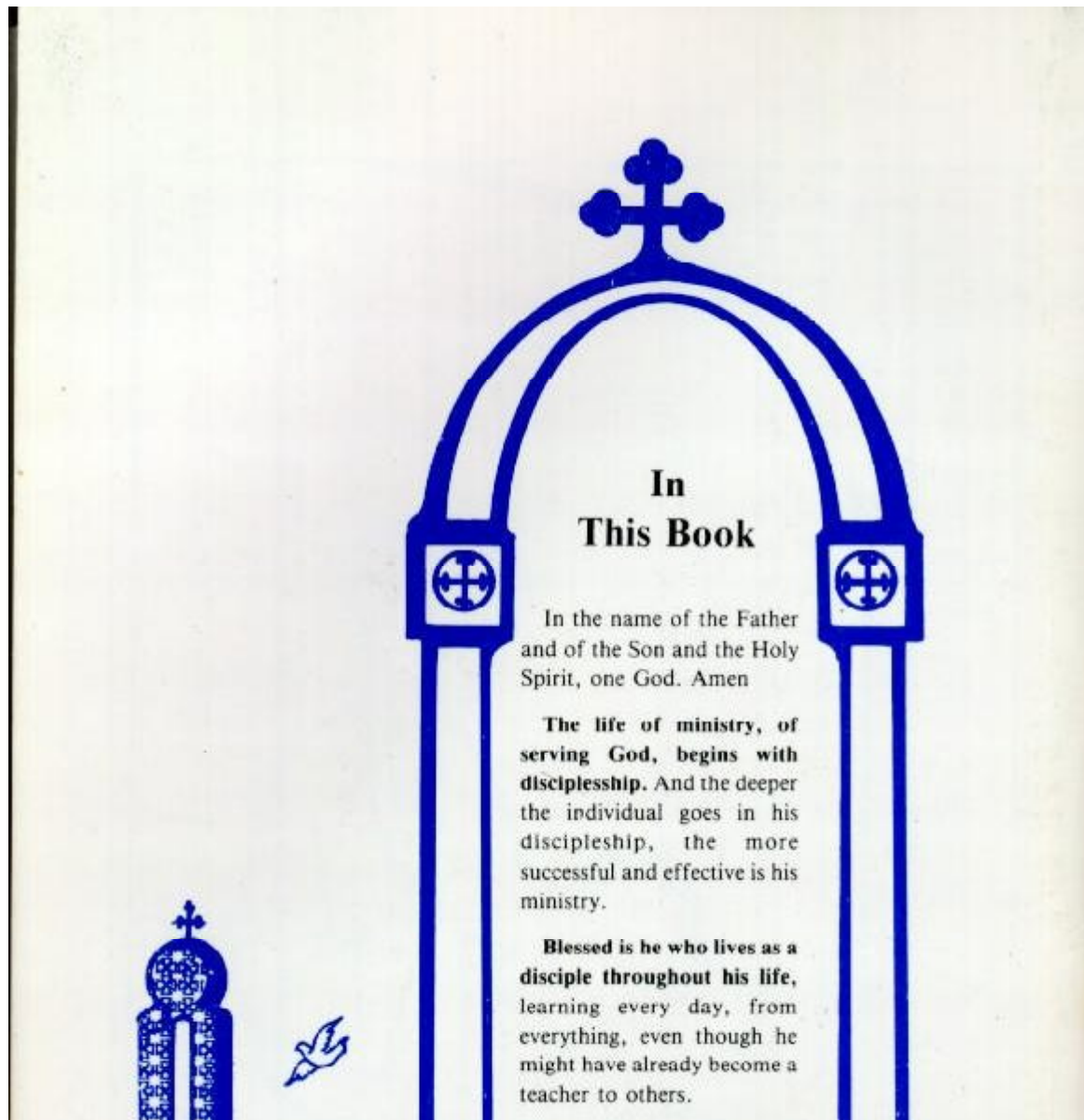
What spirit was that? And how can you guarantee it?! The Bible says: "...Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. " (1 John 4:1) And Paul also says: " *Test all things;*" (1 Thess. 5:21).

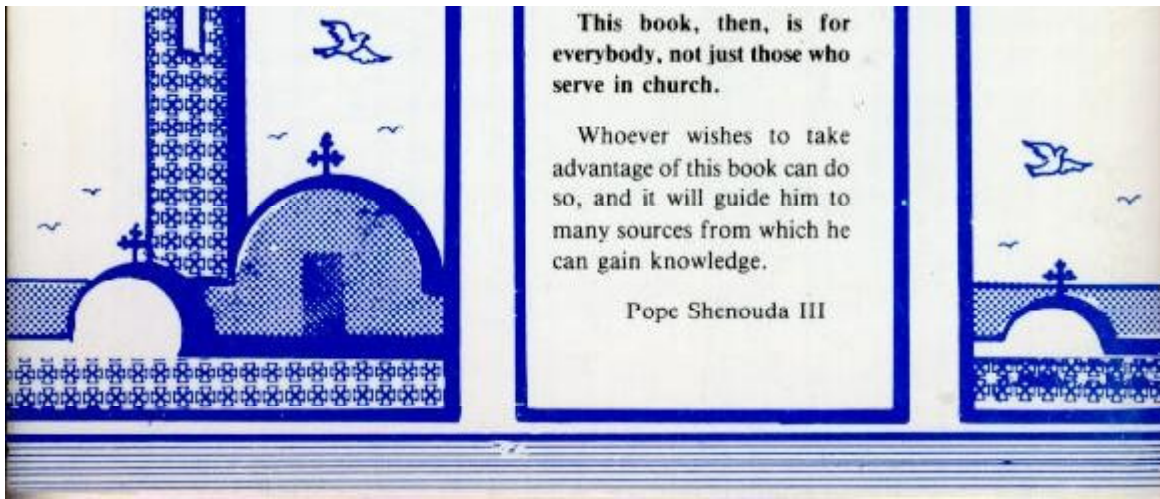
17. There are probably many sources of ideas which you imagine are from God. There are your own ideas, or your personal fantasies. And there are those ideas which have sunk into your mind when it was empty, which have come from things that you have read or heard before. This may be a trick of the Devil though, and so you need to proceed slowly and cautiously, to read the Bible, ask questions and seek guidance.

Dear friends, be humble and be disciples. And remember your guides who have spoken the word of God to you

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