

The Letter of the Month

of St. Antonious and St. Mina Coptic Orthodox Church

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The Family Altar

“But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD” (Josh 24:15).

“You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates” (Deut 6:5-9). Once again, the Lord says, “You shall teach them to your children” (Deut 11:19). This commandment teaches us to implant the Word of God in our hearts and teach it to our children by narrating it to them, by recounting it in every place, by securing it to our hands, by focusing on it with our eyes, and by writing it everywhere.

The house is the place where we must practice this commandment, by reading the Word of God with our children and thanking Him together in prayer for all his works. Joshua son of Nun spoke of his family altar saying, *“But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD” (Josh 24:15). Likewise, Asaph says, “Which we have heard and known, And our fathers have told us. We will not hide them from their children, Telling to the generation to come the praises of the LORD, And His strength and His wonderful works that He has done...Which He commanded our fathers, That they should make them known to their children; That the generation to come might know them, The children who would be born, That they may arise and declare them to their children, That they may set their hope in God, And not forget the works of God, But keep His commandments; And may not be like their fathers, A stubborn and rebellious generation, A generation that did not set its heart aright, And whose spirit was not faithful to God” (Ps 78:3-8). From these words we can see that Asaph praised the fathers who taught him God’s law.*

Truly this is the fruit of the family altar, where the parents gather with their children around them, observing the light of the commandment, learning the truth, and living the life of holiness and purity in front of God. From the life of Christ Jesus on Earth, we know that he visited many homes and found rest there. Did he not attend the wedding at Cana of Galilee? His presence there was a blessing. He also visited the house of Zacchaeus the tax collector and restored him. He went to the house of Jairus and raised his daughter, to the

house of Peter and healed his mother-in-law, and to the house of Matthew the tax collector when he invited Him and *“gave Him a great feast in his own house” (Lk 5:29). Another house that the Lord found comfort in was in Bethany for “Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus” (Jn 11:5). When He went there, Martha served while Mary sat at His feet to hear His teaching and comforting words. He raised their brother from the dead and Mary poured the oil of spikenard on His feet. These are all examples of homes that Christ found rest in. I wonder if Christ our God finds rest and comfort now in our homes or if He is still at the door knocking and we are not awakened to hear His voice! We refuse to let Him in to live and abide with us that we may delight in His divine presence.*

In the commission of the Apostles, the home was the first goal. *“And when you go into a household, greet it. If the household is worthy, let your peace come upon it. But if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you” (Mt 10:12-13).*

God chose Abraham to be his *“friend” (Isaiah 41:8)* and later said, *“For I have known him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the LORD” (Gen 18:19).*

And the Apostle Paul describes to us the homes of some Christians as the church for prayer, worship, contemplation on the word of God and describes the praises that are held in them. He said, *“Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus... Likewise greet the church that is in their house” (Rom 16:3, 5). “The churches of Asia greet you. Aquila and Priscilla greet you heartily in the Lord, with the church that is in their house” (1 Cor 16:19). “Greet the brethren who are in Laodicea, and Nymphas and the church that is in his house” (Col 4:15). “Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved friend and fellow laborer... and to the church in your house” (Philem 1:1).*

This was the image of the Christians’ homes, not only in the Apostolic era, but also at later times. Eusebius of Caesarea demonstrates to us, in the third century and the beginning of the fourth, the image of the Christian home. He informs us that in every house of the Christians in Alexandria

and its vicinity, and especially near the lake of Mariout, there was a room dedicated to worship called the “cell” or the holy room (that is what St. John Chrysostom calls the “Church of the House”). In this room, the people of the house practiced various aspects of worship, abstaining from food and drink, subjecting the body to ascetic life, continually reading the books of the prophets, and praising the Lord in hymns and songs. Listening in submission to the sayings of the fathers, the gospels, and the letters, they contemplated on them. On special occasions they recited accounts of their martyrs which expressed endurance to persecution and fearlessness toward death. In this beautiful spiritual atmosphere the children were fed the life of holiness and love of Christ Jesus.

Likewise, Timothy knew the holy scriptures from his childhood and the faith abided in him, which had dwelt first in his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice. St. Antonious was reared properly by his Christian parents and was consistent in reading the Holy Scriptures. St. Shenoute the Archimandrite’s love and disposition toward worship were observed by his father who then entrusted him to his uncle Pigol for training. St. Shenoute later became the monastery’s abbot. Similarly, St. Dimiana’s father encouraged her toward the life of asceticism in a special house that he built for her.

The family is, as St. John Chrysostom says, “the icon of the Church.” The image of the Church is one that gives birth to its own new members and applies the words of scripture within the world. “The blessings of marriage include having children, not only by physical birth, but also for a second birth. For the physical birth is unto damnation, death, and judgment if not born again for eternal life,” as St. Augustine says. The home has a commission toward child-rearing in a Christian way, and it is responsible for handing down the faith to the children in all its particulars and with detailed foundation, according to the pledge that the mother takes on behalf of her child on the day of baptism. She vows to raise the child a perfect Christian life after renouncing the devil on the child’s behalf as well as declaring her faith on the child’s behalf. Along with the milk nursed, the mother must convey the faith in and the love for Christ Jesus and the life of purity and holiness. She is entrusted to protect the child’s growing faith so that it is not affected by any external disruptive elements. This requires that we reestablish the meetings of the church of the house in every home, where all can gather around the Holy Bible for reading, contemplation, and prayer in one spirit and praising God in hymns and songs. We fear that our homes now might have forgotten the gospel, fervent prayer,

spiritual gatherings, and the lives of the saints; while substituting them with media channels, worldly songs, and the lives of the world’s stars and heroes!

Pressures are increasing everyday to inhibit spiritual life. Therefore, do not allow disruptions to exist within the home as well. Rather, make the home an opportunity for spiritual living and an atmosphere from which the children can breathe in the spotless pure life, that they may not flee from it.

Rebuilding the ruined family altar has become an unyielding necessity in these times. It is a source of power. Has not the Lord Jesus Christ said, “*Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them*” (Mt 18:19-20)? Whenever the Lord Christ is amongst us, we will enjoy His presence, holiness, and blessing. All sources of division, conflict, stubbornness, and evil will fade away and the home will abide in peace, tranquility, and love. Everyone will work to fulfill the other with a steady vision focused on eternal life and aiming for a life of diligence and purity.

However, some parents or children may object to [having a family altar] and suggest the inability of having such spiritual meetings at home. They might say they were unaccustomed to it. But being unaccustomed does not mean ignoring an important and essential aspect of our lives. Let us have practical beginnings, and the members of the home will eventually get accustomed to such meetings. All will realize, after they begin, the blessing and indispensability of these meetings. Some others may object and say that their family schedule is unpredictable and that it is rare for all to be available at the same time. But let those who can coordinate their schedules begin and set aside time for these meetings. When all members begin to realize the importance, they will work together faithfully to arrange their schedules accordingly.

May the Lord strengthen you for every good work. The Lord be with you. Pray for us.

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