



**COPTIC ORTHODOX
PATRIARCHATE**



See of St. Mark

THE RELEASE OF THE SPIRIT

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[20]

IT HAPPENED THAT NIGH

'Those persons devoted all their lives to God.. They spent every minute of their time in the ministry.. .They considered the spiritual ministry their main work and other worldly affairs as secondary'

It happened on that night that I was alone in my private room, stretched on my seat and looking at nothing when a sinful smile passed on my lips... Perhaps I was thinking of myself as a minister... But something strange happened, I do not know whether my head became heavy and I fell asleep, or my thoughts strayed and turned into dreams, or God showed me a revelation.. **The only thing I know is that I looked and saw before me a group of angels of light who carried me on their wings and I went up...**

I looked down on the earth below me and found it diminishing little by little until it looked like a tiny luminous spot in space... I listened also to the noise of the world and heard it decrease and then turn into silence.. I felt my body becoming lighter and lighter until I felt as if I were a spirit without a body.. I looked around me in bewilderment and saw many

spirits swimming like me in the limitless space. I saw also thousands and tens of thousands of angels, the Cherubim each with six wings and the Seraphim full of eyes. The voices of all rose in wonderful harmony saying, "Holy, Holy, Holy". I found myself unconsciously chanting with them, *"Holy is God the Father... Holy is the Only-Begotten Son... Holy is the Holy Spirit"*.

I woke up from my chanting on hearing a holy faint tune which no ear has ever heard before.. I went towards the source of the sound very eager to see what was there... I found, before me, at a distance, a beautiful luminous city hanging in the heavens and echoing hymns and songs.. Every tune filled my heart with joy and my soul with longing... Inside the city, far off, there were shadows that looked more beautiful than the angels.. There was Moses, Elijah and all the prophets.. There were St. Anthony, St. Athanasius and all the saints.. I saw also my fathers the bishops and priests - and my confession father.. There were also some of my colleagues the teachers of the Sunday Schools... I could not wait to see , I rushed towards that luminous city.. But.. to my amazement, I could not proceed because there was a valiant, awful, venerable and dignified angel who stood in my way saying, - 'Stop where you are! Where are you going?' - I answered, 'I am going into this great city, my master the angel, where I see my colleagues, my brethren and my fathers the saints'..

But the angel looked at me in astonishment and said, 'But this is the city of the ministers.. are you one of them? When I replied positively, he said, **'You are wrong my friend.. Your name is not in the list of the ministers'**.

I was overwhelmed by astonishment and cried in the face of that angel, who was in guard of the city, saying, 'How is that? Perhaps you do not know me, my master the angel! Ask about me in the Sunday Schools, in the meetings of the youth, in the churches and the assemblies.. Ask about me even in the city of the ministers itself, for many of my colleagues, the teachers of Sunday Schools know me well.'

- He answered me, 'I know you well.. and they also know you.. Yet you are not-in God's judgement-a minister'.

I could not bear these words and I fell on my knee weeping bitterly.. when another angel came and wiped away every tear from my eyes and said to me gently, 'My brother, you are in the place from where sorrow and sighing fled away. Why are you sorry then? Come and let us reason together. And we sat alone.. reasoning together.. He said, **'Those whom you see in the city of the ministers devoted all their lives to God.. They spent every moment of their time in the ministry.** Do you not agree with me that the lives of St. Paul and other apostles, the lives of the bishops, priests and deacons and the lives of the saints? As for you my friend, you were not devoted to the ministry but you served the world.. All your spiritual ministry was just one hour every week in the Sunday Schools.. And sometimes your service in other fields made you give God another hour.. For those two hours then you want to be with the apostles, the prophets and the priests in the city of the ministers?' During all this talk I was bowing my head in shame but I tried to overcome my bashfulness and dared to ask the angel,

- But I see in the city some of my colleagues the teachers of the Sunday Schools who did the same service like me'

- Here, the angel replied, 'No, they are not like you.. **Though they served one hour or more in the Sunday Schools, they spent the whole week getting ready for that hour..** They spent much time preparing the lessons, the illustrative media, and the means which would make the persons ministered to desire to hear the lesson, and above all praying for all this.. They also gave much care to examine the state of each pupil separately and to think of a way to reform him.. Add to this their involvement in visiting those persons, and inventing useful means to fill the time of those pupils during the week.. Besides they had other concealed services which you do not know. They considered the spiritual ministry their main work and other worldly affairs as secondary.. This does not mean that they neglected their responsibilities and worldly duties; No, for they were very faithful and successful in performing them. Such worldly affairs even comprised some service! Thus God counted them consecrated'

- I wondered at these words and asked him, 'How can I be a minister though I am busy with my worldly work?'

- The angel replied, 'Perhaps, my brother, you have forgotten the generality of the ministry! **You ought to serve God at any time and in any place** whether in the church, in the street, amidst your family, in the place of your work or wherever you go or exist..

There must be no separation between one's job and one's ministry.. In the city of the ministers we have teachers who were able to attract their Christian pupils to the Sunday Schools and could reform them and gave them continuous care.. We have also in the city, physicians who did not practice medicine merely for profit but were concerned first of all about the health of their patients whatever their financial condition was. They sometimes treated the patient and sent him the medicine free. They even established hospitals and dispensaries which offered medical care free of charge.. We have also employees who encouraged their colleagues to go to church, to confess and partake of the holy sacraments.. There are also, engineers, lawyers, artists, merchants and manufacturers.. who served God while, practicing their works.. Where you like them?

I was ashamed of myself and gave no reply.. But the angel continued blaming me severely,

- 'That was concerning your ministry within the scope of your job.. **What about serving your own family!** Joshua whom you see in the city said, "*As for me and my house we will serve the Lord*" (Josh. 24:15).. What about you? You did not serve your family but rather disputed continually with them.. You failed to be 'a model for them to follow.. What did you do for your friends, your neighbours and acquaintances? You used to visit them on the Nativity and Easter days but never talked to them about these occasions, about the new regeneration and the rising from sin.. On the other hand, you took part in their worldly joys and wasted many opportunities given to you to serve them... Do you consider yourself-in spite of all this-a minister?'

I bowed my head in shame for the third time, but I tried to give a reply saying,

-'But, my master the angel, you know I am of poor talents and it was impossible for me to perform all this service.'

The angel was astonished at my words and seemed as if hearing such a view for the first time. He addressed me sharply,

'Talents! Who said that without talents you cannot serve! My brother, there is what is called **silent preaching**.. You were not required to deliver a sermon but to be an example.. When people look at your face they learn meekness, cheerfulness and simplicity... When they hear you talking, they learn chastity, truth and honesty.. When they deal with you they find leniency, faithfulness, sacrifice and love of others. Thus they love you, imitate you and become godly though you did not preach them or deliver a sermon .. You could have prayed for them and your prayers would have benefited them more than your preaching'

For the fourth time I felt ashamed and confused and could not reply.. And again the angel continued , By silent preaching, you ought to have avoided offences. You ought to have refrained from any behaviour though it be innocent outwardly, if people were to misunderstand it and be offended by it.. Thus, you would have been blameless before God and people as the Holy Bible tells us, putting before you the words of St. Paul the Apostle,

" All things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful"
(1 Cor. 6:12).

I contemplated on my life and found that in many cases I made others-though unintentionally- sin.. Here the angel cut my reflections saying leniently"

- "This is not all... I want to tell you besides, that I pitied you much, my dear human friend... I pitied you more when you were in the world.. and particularly at the times you suffered from self-righteousness.. As you looked at your numerous services you thought of yourself an example of ministry while you were not counted as a minister at all.. You may remember many other faults you made.

For example, yours was a formal service.. You used to go to the Sunday Schools as a weekly habit.. and to lead the prayers, take down the names of the present and the absent, and give prizes to the pupils who attended regularly and neglect the absent as if he was not in your charge.. Your service was void of the Spirit and love and so could not touch the hearts of the children. Your words and acts were not coming from your heart.., your chanting lacked the spirit of joy.., your prayers were not humble, meditative or imploring and your orders lacked the spirit of love.. Thus your service was not effective.. Even when you preached in the church, you did so because the priest asked you, and you promised and had to fulfil your promise.. Your main concern was to divide the subject into sections and put them in order in such a form that might attract the admiration more than gain the salvation of the souls.. Your voice-though being loud, harmonious and clear-was cold and had no life in it..

You felt happy when anyone praised you even though you did not show this, but you were not concerned about whether your words gave such a person new life or not..

Do you not see, my friend, that you served yourself rather than God and people! Do you not remember that you welcomed the service in famous great churches crowded with people rather than the service in small unknown churches! This is yet another evidence against you?

Moreover, your ministry lacked two things : the love for the ministry and the love of those whom you ministered to..

As for the love of the ministry, it is evident in the words of the Lord Jesus Christ, "*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness..*" (Matt. 5:6) Were you hungry and thirsty for the salvation of the souls? Were you dreaming all the week of the hour which you were to spend with your children at the Sunday Schools? Did you feel pain for anyone who did not come and longed to see him not calming down until you met him and explained to him the lesson which he missed! **As for the second matter which is the love of those ministered to:** Did you really love them, and love them to the end as the Lord Jesus Christ did for His disciples? Did you feel compassion upon and give them abounding kindness? And the pupils themselves, did they love you likewise? Or were you all the time rebuking and punishing them by not giving them prizes and pictures? Who told you that this way was fit for reforming them? Love, my dear the man, is the main basis for ministry.. Unless you love those whom you minister to, you will not be

able to serve them.. and unless they love you, they will not benefit from you'

Here, my real self being revealed to me , I was ashamed but the angel looked at me very sympathetically and lovingly and said,

- 'I want to tell you an important fact which is that you ought to have spent a long time getting ready and filled up before starting the ministry.. But because you started early without having sufficient spiritual experience, you fell in many faults'

I looked at him inquiringly as if finding it hard for me to make any faults while I was responsible for correcting the faults of others.. The angel observing my look said,

- 'There was a boy whom you dismissed from the Sunday Schools for his disobedience and for not following the discipline; this made him more obstinate and led him to the street and to wicked company.. Thus he became worse and many serious harms befell him due to your behaviour.. especially after he had lost guidance and care.. Certainly you were responsible for that because it was your responsibility,

- I answered the angel, 'But sir, he used to interrupt the lesson and was a bad example for the others!'

Here the angel replied bitterly,

- 'Then, you dismissed him for that reason? Oh, you are poor! Did the Lord Jesus Christ send you to call the righteous, or the sinners, to repentance? Your blessed pupils, who were

the cause of your feeling self-righteousness, had their blessedness from God.. He worked within them.. But this naughty boy ought to have been taken care of by you.. For such a type you were called by God.. I tell you plainly, had you devoted all your efforts to reform that boy alone without doing any other service, that would have been sufficient to let you enter the city of the ministers.. You ought to have recognised the value of that soul and ought to have had much long-suffering..

A minister of the Sunday Schools who lacks these two qualities does not deserve to be a minister..'

- I said to the angel imploring, 'What do you think I ought to have done for that boy?

- He answered: 'You ought to have served him as far as you could.. to have examined his interior and dealt with him according to his state.. You ought to have prayed much for him.. and if you had done all this but it was useless, you ought not to have dismissed him but sent him to another class.. Perhaps another minister would have succeeded to achieve what you have failed to do.. If this solution had not been of any benefit, you could have allocated one or more classes for such naughty children where they could have had a special care according to their condition.. Such children ought to have been visited frequently and given sincere care making them near to your hearts.. and not dismissing them in any case.. They were not more wicked than Zacchaeus, the Samaritan woman or the people of Nineveh in their bad state.. Who ministers to God never knows despair as long as he has humility in prayers and a loving heart.'

I regretted my past actions but the angel continued,

- 'There was another boy in your class who was absent for a week or two and you did not visit him.. You behaved like an official employee at the Sunday Schools and just wrote his name down as an absentee.. The boy, seeing that you did not visit him, came no longer and you, seizing the opportunity, wrote off his name from your list'

At this point the angel looked firmly at me and said,

'Why did you not visit him?' I felt weak before him due to his sharp voice and firm look, so I kept silent in fear.. But he repeated the question more harshly this time, 'Why did you not visit him?' I felt as if a storm was crushing my head and did not reply while the angel trembled and said in agitation,

- 'His spiritual condition now arouses pity.. and if he continues so, he will...'Here the angel's voice quivered, he stopped a little, then said,

- 'I and many other angels pray for him that God may save him.. However, if God responds to our prayers and sends him another minister who may be honest and the boy is saved, you will not be excused.'

His voice was faint and distressed.. I could not bear hearing it.. so I felt everything revolving before my eyes and I fainted and fell down..

When I came to myself I found the angel looking at me compassionately.. This encouraged me to speak.. I said,

- 'Please forgive me sir, there were thirty boys' in my class and I was not able to visit them all.'

- But he replied me, 'You also were tempted with the same temptation.. that of the number of those whom you minister to? God does not measure any service with the measure of the numbers.. but rather by the number of those who are actually renewed and saved.. I know it was difficult for you to take care of thirty boys with respect to discipline, visits, care and teaching It was even difficult for you to learn their names by heart.. You could not say as the Lord Jesus Christ said, *'I know My sheep, and am known by My own'*. (John. 10:14). Why then did you not confine your service to ten only for example?..'

Finding no answer for his question I preferred to keep silent.. But he continued,

- 'Do you know the main reason for your failure besides what we have mentioned? It is self-reliance.. You forgot to fast and pray for the ministry.. Your colleagues in the Sunday Schools, who are now in the city of the ministers, used to pray and to fast for their classes.. Every day they mentioned their children before God asking Him for each of them separately.. They used to ask the father priests to raise prayers in a special Mass for them.. Did you do that?

That was concerning your spiritual ministry.. What about your material service? Did you consider it a secondary matter? Did you not remember how the rich man perished because he

did not have compassion upon poor Lazarus? Did you not hear the words of the Lord Jesus Christ addressed to those on the left hand, "... *I was hungry and you gave Me no food, I was thirsty... naked... sick...* ". (Matt. 25:42,43). What did you do of all this? Did you not insist to have certain luxuries while your brethren were in bad need for necessities? Did you not...'

I could not bear more and cried out in pain 'Please sir, stop.. I realise now that I was not deserving at all to enter the city of the ministers. I was self-conceited.. to a far extent.. But now, having known everything, I ask for another chance to behave as a real honest minister'

The angel said to me, 'You had your chance but you did not make good use of it.. Now your days on earth have ended..."

I entreated him and wept and begged but he looked at me compassionately and lovingly, then left me alone and went away while I was still crying out, 'I want another chance... I want another chance' But he disappeared and I fell on my knees still crying, 'I want another chance', everything turning around me and I fainted again..

A long time had passed before I came to myself.. I opened my eyes to find myself, to my great astonishment, alone in my private room, stretched on my seat.. I looked around not believing, I looked again but it was true..!

Oh, how merciful You are God! Is it true I have another chance to be a good minister! I got up and raised my heart with a deep thanksgiving prayer.. I decided to tell my brethren the ministers everything to strive in order to deserve to enter the

city of the ministers. Thus, I took some papers and began to write, 'It happened that night...!'.

