

A GOOD WORD



Its Healing Power

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An address delivered in honor of Metropolitan Cyprian of Oropos and Fili, President of the Holy Synod, at a tribute commemorating his Nameday (October 2 [Old Style]), convened on October 6, 2003 (Old Style), at the Convention Center of the Novotel in Athens, Greece.

Our Most Reverend Metropolitan and Much-Revered Spiritual Father; Holy Hierarchs; Revered Fathers and Brothers; Honorable Company of Monastics; Beloved Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

I

Trusting in your good wishes and prayers, unworthy as I am, I beseech you to allow me to present the theme of our gathering this evening very concisely and in a straightforward and simple fashion.

I have no desire to prolong my remarks, for our only competent—indeed quintessential—teachers and guides to the genuine ethos of the Church are our Bishops, the living Icons of Christ, whose persons are the very embodiment of the local Church.

Invoking, then, the assistance and guidance of our All-Holy Mother and of Sts. Cyprian and Justina, whose memory we are honoring, I will virtually make so bold, ever so warily, as to set forth just as much as is necessary for a brief introduction to the value and healing power of a good word.

We humbly pray and hope that, on a suitable occasion, our Most Reverend Metropolitan will, in his truly charismatic manner of address, expound on this so important and salutary subject at length and in depth.

For the time being, may our spiritual Father permit us, we beg him, to cast a small seed into the hearts of our well-disposed brethren in Christ. This seed is quite literally his own, since it was he who first sowed it in our hearts, where it has yielded “thirtyfold” in some, “sixtyfold” in others, and “a hundredfold” in yet others.¹

Furthermore, it is on account of this abundant harvest that we have selected our theme this year; we wanted, above all, to express

our gratitude to our spiritual Father for the beneficial effects of his good words in our hearts.

II

Let us, therefore, approach this beautiful and, at the same time, profound theme on the basis of one of the most vivid examples in our Tradition, one which fills one with compunction and which bears direct witness to the value of a good word and to its healing power.

Abba Makarios of Egypt and his disciple were once going up from Sketis to Mount Nitria.

As they approached their destination, the Elder told his disciple: 'Go on a short distance ahead.' The disciple, as he went on ahead, encountered an idolater. The latter was a priest and was walking hurriedly, holding a staff.



'Hey, Satan, to where are you rushing?' the monk impetuously exclaimed.

At that moment, the priest was so incensed, that he turned towards the monk and thrashed him relentlessly. He ended up leaving him half-dead. Thereupon, he took his staff and made haste to depart.

A little while later, Abba Makarios saw this priest. He at once began to greet him with profound kindness: 'May God bless you, you busy fellow. May it be well with you, O man of toil. May you be saved, may you be saved.'

The idolater was perplexed. He approached the Saint and asked him: 'What good did you see in me, Abba, that you

wished me to be saved?'

'I see you toiling and rushing,' replied the Saint, 'and you are not aware, O blessed man, that you are laboring in vain.'

'My heart was softened and mellowed by your greeting,' said the pagan priest, who had by now regained his composure. 'I realize that you are a man of God. But someone else, some wretched monk, insulted me when he met me a short time ago, and I really sorted him out. I left him half-dead from the blows he received.'

He then immediately fell at the feet of Abba Makarios, clasped them, and said to the Elder: 'I will not let you go unless you make me a monk.'

The Saint raised him up, and together they went to the place where his disciple was lying. They lifted him up and carried him to the Church on Mount Nitria.

When the monks saw the pagan priest with the Abba, they were astonished.

Eventually, after Baptizing him, they made the priest a monk, and because of him many pagans became Christians.

Abba Makarios, thereupon, said: 'An evil word makes even a good

man evil, whereas a good word turns even an evil man into a good one.'

An evil word makes even good people evil, and a good word makes even evil people good.²

My initial observation, which I think expresses the general sense of this compunctionate narrative, is that it is permeated by the following very strong antitheses: the language of the impetuous disciple and the language of the mature Elder; the evil word and the good word; the language of disdain and the language of acceptance; that language that arouses to anger and that language that becalms; that language that darkens another person and language which enlightens him.

Now, do words, in and of themselves, possess such properties? Is language endowed with such powers, powers that are, in fact, simultaneously antithetical? What kind of language, finally, is this? What secret does it conceal? Psychology could certainly offer profound answers to these questions;³ but this incident, this small drama of the Egyptian desert, obliges us to give answers of a different order.

Let us, therefore, examine this issue more closely, with the blessing of the Holy Fathers. In the first place, we notice that the pagan priest recognized at once, in the person of Abba Makarios, a genuine man of God, whereas in the person of the disciple he saw one who was a man of God only on the surface.

In other words, it seems that the effectiveness of a man's speech depends directly on the spiritual state of his heart. In truth, if our speech emanates from a heart in which the Incarnate Word of God dwells and reposes, then our speech becomes a conveyor and vehicle of the illuminating and peace-bestowing Grace of God. Contrariwise, if our speech proceeds from a life dominated by the activity of dark passions, then our speech conveys to others the murk and confusion of evil spirits.

We may, therefore, arrive at this initial and basic conclusion: when St. Makarios converted the idolater by means of his good words, he did not employ a technique or a method that involved any kind of proselytizing; rather, he gave spontaneous expression to the outpouring of his heart, which was inundated with the Grace of the Holy Spirit and the love of Christ.

III

But now, let us transport ourselves to the slums of Athens, where, at the beginning of the previous century, the blessed presence of Papa-Nicholas Planas diffused hope and holiness.

This holy Priest of the Most High would very often visit a family which had rented an area of its courtyard to a certain cobbler. The hapless cobbler was an atheist and a prominent member of the Commu-

nist movement. As the ever-memorable Eldress Martha, a disciple of Papa-Nicholas, tells us:



[The]...hatred [of this cobbler] towards all, and especially towards Priests, knew no bounds. In the place where he worked, he would talk to himself and rant about where he and his comrades would begin slaughtering Priests.

He would say: 'To start with, we'll slaughter the Priests of the [Church of] the Life-giving Spring.' And he would go on to talk about the others in turn.

The blessed Papa-Nicholas, with his characteristic kindness, approached the man and saying to him: "Good evening, my child."

Without raising his head from his work, he muttered something. Father went there again the following Saturday and said to him: 'Good evening, my dear Luke.' The cobbler replied, 'Good evening,' again without raising his head.

On his third visit, Father again said to him: 'Good evening, my dear Luke; how are you doing, my child?' Luke was obliged to say: 'I'm doing well, Father.'

Father continued to visit him at his place of work, until the ice was broken.

The cobbler [at last] stood up from his work and respectfully kissed the Father's hand.'

Then, addressing himself to those who had accompanied the Priest, he declared:

'When they starting killing the Priests, I'll speak up for Papa-Nicholas, so that they won't kill him. And I won't just speak up for him, I'll protect him!'

Thereafter, whenever Father would come, Luke would hasten to meet him and kiss his hand.

It is worth noting that Papa-Nicholas, whose goodness was unsurpassed,

...did not know what the cobbler's intentions were, had no idea what Communism was,* and was unaware of the change that had taken place in Luke—or so we suppose. Who knows what he saw with the clairvoyant gift of his soul?

Anyway, no matter how many sermons this Communist might have heard, no matter how many admonitions he might have been given, none of them could have had as much influence on his indurate soul as the

goodness of this grey-haired little Elder, who would conscientiously visit him time and again, indifferent to the fact that he had been scorned at the outset.

But the ending of this story is even more striking:

As a result of Father's simple greetings the cobbler repented, and when, after a short while, he fell ill with a disease (paralysis of the lower extremities of his legs) and died at the age of thirty, he reposed as a good Christian and certainly without...having killed anyone.

Father's personality exerted the same influence on all who knew him, and for this reason he had no enemies, except Satan; but Father reduced even him to nothing, through the Grace of the Holy Spirit, Who had come to dwell in his soul.⁴

In this compunctionate account, we see again the essence and the source of the healing power of a good word: the Grace of the Holy Spirit had come to dwell in the heart of the blessed Papa-Nicholas and imparted illuminating and peace-bestowing power to his words.

However, let us examine this point more closely.

Papa-Nicholas Planas, by virtue of having the God of love in his heart, did not see "anything insignificant or contemptible"⁵ in this hapless cobbler; rather, in this man's face he saw the very image of God, which had to be treated "with reverence, regardless of his sorry state."⁶

This profound and fundamental evangelical truth helps us to reach our second basic conclusion: "No matter what plight a man might be in, he continues to be the image of God, he continues to be one"⁷ who was redeemed by the priceless Blood of our Savior Christ. Consequently, our attitude towards him should not be either stiff or informal, nor should it simply express a sense of social obligation; rather, it should be, first and foremost, an attitude of Christ-centered reverence and love.

In conclusion, we ought to be aware that the efficacy of our speech towards another person "is always proportionate to the amount of genuine love for our fellowman that nestles in our hearts."⁸

IV

Now, in order to remain faithful to my promise of "a brief introduction" to our subject, I will bring my meager thoughts to an end with another compunctionate story, as well as a third and final conclusion:

Tradition tells us that the Holy Apostle James, the brother of St. John the Evangelist, at the time he was being led out to martyrdom, encountered on the way the man who had betrayed him.

He stopped the man, kissed him sincerely, and said to him: 'May you have the peace of God, my brother. May the Lord bless you.'

On seeing such forbearance, the Apostle's betrayer marvelled and exclaimed with enthusiasm: 'I, too, am a Christian from this day forth!'

After this profession of faith, he was beheaded together with the Apostle.⁹

In this wondrous event we discover, first, the expression of a truly Divine love: when a man is endowed with such forbearance that he loves his enemy and sincerely blesses him, then such a man undoubtedly becomes God by Grace.

Next, we see that the good word which issued from this most Divine love was of such like power, that it not only healed and transformed the other, but also led him to martyrdom for the sake of Christ.

Alas, are we not far away from such genuine, such sublime, and such Divine love, when our heart is in turmoil and is darkened because someone has offended the idol that we have made of ourselves? When our tongue is aquiver to crush the worth of our brother, the very image of God?

Our Most Reverend Metropolitan and Much-Revered Spiritual Father:

We thank you again, because good words have never ceased to flow from the goodness of your heart and to irrigate our own hearts, which are, to a greater or lesser extent, barren.

We are witnesses of the innumerable miracles which Divine Grace has accomplished through the good word of your love, a love which resides in you and overflows freely from within you and gives your word the power to heal, transform, and enlighten us.

Allow us, O our spiritual Father beloved of Christ, to offer you our heartfelt wishes on the occasion of your Nameday and thereby to conclude this artless talk:

May the Immaculate *Theotokos* and the Holy Patrons of our monastery preserve you “in safety, honor, health, and length of days,” and may they also maintain an unceasing flow of good words from you, for the edification, transformation, and salvation in Christ of your rational flock. Amen.

Notes

1. Cf. St. Matthew 13:8; St. Mark 4:8.
2. Abba Makarios 39, in *Τὸ Γεροντικόν* (Athens: “Astir” Publications, 1961), p. 71ab.
3. See Papa-Philotheos Pharos, *Ὁ Διάλογος—Ἀρχές καὶ Μέθοδοι* [*Dialogue: Principles and Methods*] (Athens: “Akritis” Publications, 1983). “This work is based above all and primarily on the first-hand psychotherapeutic, pastoral, and teaching experience of its author, and also on certain simple texts which proved useful to him and his pupils,” one of which—and the most fundamental—is the episode involving Abba Makarios.
4. Nun Martha (†), *Ὁ Παπα-Νικόλας Πλανάς* [*Papa-Nicholas Planas*], §42, “The Tamed Beast” (Athens: “Astir” Publications, 1967), pp. 62–63.
5. Papa-Philotheos Pharos, *Ὁ Διάλογος*, p. 17.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

9. Cf. Abbess Theodora Chambakis, *Γεγοντιζόν* (Thessaloniki: “Lydia” Brotherhood), 7th ed., pp. 43–44. The original version of this story is found in Antiochos Pandectis, Discourse 116, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. LXXXIX, col. 1796B; cf. *The Evergetinos*, Vol. IV of the Second Book, Hypothesis XXXVII, §B (Etna, CA: Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, 2002), pp. 11–12.

* A married Priest who lived in virtual monastic asceticism, Father Nicholas Planas was an abstemious individual, an exceedingly simple man, and, though wise in the spirit, limited in his knowledge of worldly things. It is often said that when he read the difficult Greek of the Gospel during Liturgy, he made frequent errors. Nonetheless, he was a “living example of the Gospel,” grasping its profundity in a noetic manner and living in spirit what many understand only in empty letters. It is worthy of note that his humble life of contrition and inner vision attracted many of the religiously-inclined Greek intellectuals of his day, including noted theologians and writers.