

The Servant

By His Holiness Pope Shenouda III of Thrice Blessed Memory

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 servant. Then 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 went up. I looked down to earth below me, and found it diminishing little by little, until it looked like a tiny luminous spot in space. I also listened to the noise of the world and heard it decreasing, then turn into silence. I felt my body becoming lighter and lighter, as if I had turned into a spirit without a body. I looked around me in bewilderment and saw many spirits swimming like me in the unlimited space. I saw thousands of myriads of angels, the Cherubim each with six wings, and the Seraphim full of eyes. All their voices rose in a wonderful harmony saying, "Holy, holy, holy." I found myself unconsciously chanting with them, "Holy is God the Father. Holy is the Begotten Son. Holy is the Holy Spirit." I woke up from my chanting on hearing a holy, faint tune that no ear has ever heard before. I turned with much longing toward the source of the sound. I found before me, at a distance, a beautiful, luminous city, hanging in the Lord's 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 were Moses, Elijah, and all the prophets. There were also St. Anthony, St. Athanasius, and all the saints. I saw also my fathers the bishops, the priests, and my confession father. There were also some of my colleagues, the Sunday school teachers. I could not wait to see more as I rushed toward the 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." However, the angel looked at me in amazement and said, "But this is the City of Servants. Are you one of them?" When I replied positively, he said, "You are wrong, my friend. Your name is not on the list of servants." I was overwhelmed by astonishment and cried in the face of that angel who was guarding the city, and said, "How is that? Perhaps you do not know me, my master angel. Ask about me in the Sunday schools and in youth meetings, in the churches and assemblies. Also, ask about me in the City of the Servants. Many of them are colleagues who know me from Sunday school." The angel responded firmly and clearly, "I know you very well, and they also know you. But, still, in God's adjustment, you are not a servant."

I could not bear these words, so I fell on my knees weeping bitterly. But 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 have fled away. Why are you so sad? Come, and let us reason together.” And we sat alone, reasoning together. He said to me, “Those who you see in the City of Servants devoted all their lives to God. They spent every moment of their time in the service. Do you not agree with me that thus were the lives of St. Paul and the other apostles? It is the same with the life of Moses and the prophets, and also the lives of the bishops, the priests, and the deacons, as well as the lives of the saints. As for you, my friend, you were not devoted to the service, but you served the world. All your spiritual service was one hour every week that you spent in the Sunday schools, and sometimes you served in other fields that made you give God another hour. And so you think for two hours per week, you want to sit side by side with the prophets in the City of the Servants?” During all this talk, I was bowing my head in shame, but I tried to overcome, and then dared to ask the angel, “But I can see in the City of Servants some of my colleagues, the Sunday school teachers, who did the same service like me.” Here the angel replied, “No. They are not like you. It is true that they served one hour or more in Sunday school, but they spent the whole week getting ready for that hour. They spent much time preparing the lessons, visual aids, and all the means that would make the lesson interesting, while praying about all of that. They also gave much care, examining each individual they served, thinking of ways to reform those who need reforming. Adding to that, they were always busy visiting those people, and investing useful means to fill the time of their students during the week. They also had other services that were done in secret, and you never knew about them. And so they considered the spiritual service their main job, while other worldly affairs came second. I do not mean that they neglected their responsibilities and worldly affairs; rather they were very faithful and successful in performing them. Such worldly affairs also comprised some service. Thus, God counted them consecrated.”

I wondered at these words, and so I asked him, “How can I be a servant while I am busy with my worldly work?” The angel replied, “Perhaps, my brother, you have forgotten the generality of the service. You ought to serve God at all times and in every place, whether at church, on the road, among your family, and in any place, wherever you go. There should not be any separation between one’s job and his service. In the City of Servants, we have teachers who are able to attract all their Christian pupils to the Sunday schools, and manage to reform them and give them continuous care. We also have in the City of Servants doctors who did not practice medicine merely for profit, but cared first of all about the health of their patients, whatever their financial condition was. Sometimes, they treated the patient, and also gave medicine, freely. They even established hospitals which offered medical care free of charge. We also have employees who encouraged their colleagues to go to church, confess, and partake of the holy sacraments. There are also engineers, lawyers, artists, merchants, and manufacturers who served God while practicing their profession. Did you do like them?” I was ashamed of myself and gave no reply. But the angel continued to reprimand me severely and said,

“That was concerning the service within the scope of your job, but what about serving your own family? Joshua, whom you see in the City of Servants, used to say, “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord” (Josh 24:15). But you did not serve your family, but rather disputed continually with them. You failed to be a role model for them and make them your fellow servants. And what about your friends? Your colleagues, your neighbors, your acquaintances? You used to visit them on Nativity and Resurrection but never talk to them about these holy occasions, about rebirth and rising from sin. On the other hand, you took part in their worldly joys and wasted many opportunities that you could have used to serve them. Do you still consider yourself a servant?” I bowed my head in shame for the third time. I tried to give a reply, saying, “But, my master angel, you know that 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. And so 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, but when they hear you talking, they learn chastity, truth, and honesty. When they deal with you, they find tolerance, faithfulness, sacrifice, and love for others. Thus, they love you, imitate you, and become godly, though you did not preach to them or deliver a sermon from the pulpit. You could have also 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. Again, the angel continued, “As silent preaching, you could have avoided offenses. You ought to have refrained from any behavior though it could have appeared innocent. People could have misunderstood it and become offended by it. Thus, you would have been blameless before God and people, as the Holy Bible says, 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, though unintentionally, I made others sin. Here, the angel interrupted my reflection by saying leniently, “This is not all. I pity you much, my dear human friend. I pitied you more when you were in the world, and particularly at the times when you suffered from self-righteousness. As you looked at your numerous services, you thought yourself an example of service, while you were not even counted as a servant at all. You may have also committed many others errors, such as the formal service. You used to go to the Sunday schools as a weekly habit, to lead the prayers, record the attendance, reward the regular, and neglect the absent as if he was not in your charge. And so 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 of joy and your prayers with them 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 church, you did so because the priest asked you to, so you promised and had to fulfill your promise. Your main concern

was to divide the subject into sections and put them in order, in a form that might attract admiration more than gain the salvation of souls. Your voice, though it was loud, harmonious, and clear, was cold and had no life in it. You rejoiced, even within yourself, when anyone praised you, but you were not really concerned whether your words gave such a person a new life or not. Do you not see, my friend, that you served yourself rather than God and people? Do you not remember how you welcomed to serve at well-known churches that are crowded with people, rather than at small, unknown churches? Is this not another evidence against you?

Your service also lacked two things: The love of the service and the love of those whom you served. As for the love of service, it is evident in the words of the Lord Jesus Christ, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness." Were you hungry and thirsty for the salvation of souls? Were you dreaming about the hour which you will spend with your children in Sunday school? Did you feel pain if anyone did not come, and did you long to see him? Was the only thing to calm down to meet him and explain to him the lesson that he missed?

As for the second matter, which is the love of those you served, did you really love them and love them to the end, as the Lord Jesus Christ did for His disciples? Did you feel compassion on them and give them abounding kindness? And the pupils themselves, did they love you likewise? Or, were you rebuking and punishing them all the time by depriving them from receiving pictures and prizes? Who told you that this method was fit for reforming them? My dear man, love is the main basis for the service. Unless you love those whom you serve, you will never be able to serve them. And unless they love you, they will not benefit from you."

I was much ashamed, as my real self had been revealed to me. The angel looked at my with sympathy and love and said, "I want to tell you an important fact. You ought to have spent a long time getting ready and filled up spiritually before starting the service. You started early without having sufficient spiritual experience, and that is why you fell in many mistakes." I looked at him inquiringly, as if finding it hard to accept the fact that I have made any mistake while I was responsible for correcting the mistakes of others. The angel, observing my look, said, "There was a boy whom you dismissed from the Sunday schools for being disobedient and lacking discipline. It made him more stubborn and led him to the street and the evil company, and so he became worse than before. Your action caused him serious harm, especially after losing any guidance and care. Certainly, you were to blame for that, because it was your responsibility to look after him." I said to the angel, "But, my master the angel, he used to interrupt the lesson and was a bad example for others." But the angel replied bitterly, "And so you dismissed him for that reason? O, you poor man. Did the Lord Jesus Christ send you to call the righteous, or the sinners for repentance? Your blessed pupils who caused you to find self-righteousness—their blessedness came from God's work in them. But the naughty boy ought to have been taken care of by you. For such a type, you were called by God. I tell

you plainly, if you had devoted all your efforts to reforming that boy alone, without doing any other service, it would have been sufficient to let you enter the City of Servants. You ought to have recognized the value of that soul, and to have much more longsuffering. A Sunday school servant who lacks these two qualities does not deserve to be a servant.”

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 to the best of your ability and to have examined him psychologically and dealt with him according to his state. You ought to have prayed much for him, and if all that failed, you still should not have dismissed him, but sent him to another class. Perhaps another servant would have succeeded to achieve what you failed to do. If that did not work as well, then you could have allocated one or more classes for such troublesome pupils where they could have had their special care, according to their condition. Such pupils ought to have been visited frequently and given sincere care, making them near to your heart. None of them should be dismissed, no matter what. There were none more wicked than Zacchaeus, the Samaritan woman, or the people of Nineveh. God’s servant never knows despair as long as he has humility, prayer, and a loving heart.”

I regretted my past action, but the angel continued, “There was another boy in your class who was absent for one week, then for two weeks, and you did not visit him. You behaved like an official employee in Sunday school, and just recorded him absent. The boy, seeing that you did not miss him, came no longer, and you, seizing the opportunity, crossed off his name from the class 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 like that, then...” Here the angel’s voice quivered. He stopped a little, and 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 servant who may be honest and the boy is saved, you will still not be excused.” His voice was faint and distressed. I could not bear hearing it. I felt everything revolving before my eyes. I then fainted and fell down.

When I came to myself, I found the angel looking at me with compassion. It encouraged me to speak, so I said, “Please forgive me, my master angel. There were thirty boys in my class, and I was not able to visit all of them.” But he replied and said, “You even fell into this temptation, the temptation of the number. God does not measure any service with the measure of the numbers, but rather the numbers 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.’ Why, then, did you not confine your service to ten only, for

example?” Finding no answer for his question, I preferred to remain silent. But he continued, “Do you know the main reason for your failure? Besides what we have already mentioned, it is self-reliance. You forgot to fast and pray for the service. Your colleagues in the Sunday schools who are now in the City of Servants used to pray and fast for their classes. Every day, they mentioned their children before God, asking him for each individual separately. They used to ask the fathers, the priests, to raise prayers in a special liturgy for them. Did you do that? That was concerning your spiritual service. What about your material service? Did you consider it a secondary matter? Do you not remember how the rich man perished because he did not have compassion on 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...’ What have you done? Did you not insist to have certain luxuries while your brethren were in bad need for necessities? Did you not?”

I could not bear it anymore, so I cried out in pain, “Please, sir, stop. I realize now that I was not deserving at all to enter the City of Servants. I was self-conceited to a far extent. But, now, having known everything, I ask for another chance to behave as a real, honest servant.” The angel said to me, “You had your chance, but you did not make good use of it. Now your days on earth are over.” I entreated him and wept and begged, but he looked at me with much love and compassion, and then left me alone. He went away while I was still crying out, “I want another chance. I want another chance.” When he disappeared, I fell on my knees while still crying out, “I want another chance.”

Then everything turned around me, and I fainted again. A long period of time 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 me, not believing. I looked again, but it was true.

O, how merciful you are, God. Is it true that I have another chance to be a good servant? I got up and raised my heart with a deep prayer of thanksgiving. I decided to tell my brethren, the servants, everything, to strive in order to deserve to enter the City of Servants. And so I took some paper and began to write.