

Speech for Book Launch
The Life of Repentance and Purity
HH Pope Shenouda III

St Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary

Saturday 12 March 2016

It gives me great joy dear beloved Bishop David, Reverend Fathers, the Dean Very Reverend Fr Professor John Behr, the Chancellor Very Reverend Fr Professor Chad Hatfield, faculty, staff and students of St Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary, brothers and sisters in Christ to wish you all a blessed Lenten season full of hope, peace and joy.

I am very grateful and humbled by this kind invitation to address this auspicious audience. This blessed seminary and those who work within it hold a special place in my heart and bring back many fond memories of the time I studied here in 1998-99.

I learnt and was inspired by many great clergymen and scholars such as Fr Thomas Hopko, of blessed memory, the then rising scholar Dr John Behr, now a priest in the Orthodox Church in America and the dean of this prestigious Orthodox seminary, and the late Dr John Boojamra, of blessed memory. I also remember the hospitality of Fr Professor John Erickson providing me with a bedroom and a space to study in his private home and was always there to assist with any of my needs.

I would like to thank my dear friend the Very Reverend Fr Professor John Behr for his kind invitation to address you at this book launch. Fr John is a distinguished Orthodox patristics scholar who is respected and well recognized internationally through his many excellent publications and lectures. He is also recognized for building many bridges between Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Churches along with Fr Chad through the great work they do at this very fine academic institution. We at St Athanasius College in Melbourne are deeply honored that Fr John has accepted to teach an intensive course on the School of Alexandria in June/July this year in Melbourne where students from all over the Australian continent will come to learn from him.

Everywhere I go and certainly at our fledgling theological college in Melbourne, I always speak very highly of St Vladimir's and follow closely how this seminary continues to evolve. In my opinion it is the premier Orthodox academic institution for the study of all aspects of Orthodox faith and life.

I believe that this seminary is well placed to be a central hub through which reconciliation between Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Churches can take place.

I am extremely proud, honored and grateful to be present at the launch of this new initiative of a Coptic Studies Series by SVS Press and SAC Press and to be chosen as Series Editor with my dear friend Fr John Behr. I believe that this new series will assist to strengthen the ties between Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Churches. In

particular this series will highlight the rich spirituality, theology, history, art and monastic tradition of the Copts and will add an extra flavor to the over 500 excellent publications of SVS Press. This means that now through this initiative of SVS Press, readers around the world may experience a richer Orthodox understanding from both an Eastern and Oriental Orthodox perspective on a plethora of interesting and important subjects related to Orthodox faith and life.

Such publications are vital to bring about rapprochement and to soften the harsh hearts on both sides that are still not willing to listen to the other in meekness and with spiritual ears. There is no doubt in my mind that it is through such positive initiatives that Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Churches will come to a common understanding which I hope will lead to full communion of the two families of Orthodoxy. We have been separated for far too long and our peoples and youth are crying out for this unity to take place.

It is indeed timely for this book launch to happen at this time during the Lenten season. For the Eastern Orthodox, Great Lent will begin on Monday and for the Coptic Orthodox it began last Monday. It is also timely since we will in 5 days on March 17 also commemorate the memory of the author of the book, His Holiness Pope Shenouda III of blessed memory on his fourth annual commemoration of his falling asleep.

His Holiness Pope Shenouda III was a powerful leader and a very charismatic one. He was deeply loved and respected by the Copts but his legacy went far beyond the Copts. He believed in the importance of dialogue with the various Christian denominations, was a president of the WCC and the MECC. He was loved by the majority of Muslims and respected by millions in the Arab world and earned the title of "Pope of the Arabs" (baba al arab). His deep wisdom, which was steeped in the monasticism of the Egyptian desert, is what led him to make many wise decisions that gained him the admiration of the masses. The greatness of such a man could be seen at his falling asleep, where millions flooded the streets around the Cathedral to see one final glimpse of such a giant of modern Egyptian history. The Egyptian papers wrote about his funeral as I mention in the introduction to the book that is before us, that this was the funeral of the century!

In January of 2012 I had seen Pope Shenouda III for the last time in Cairo and he was very frail and it was only a few weeks later I remember been woken up at the middle of Saturday night in Melbourne to be told that he had fallen asleep and I wept bitterly. I celebrated the Divine Eucharist early on Sunday morning and headed back to Cairo for the funeral. Upon arrival to Cairo I headed straight to the cathedral to spend some time by the throne of His Holiness as he was laying in state. All the gates were shut and throngs of people were both trying to come out and more attempting to still

get in to see him. I was literally crushed by the multitudes and eventually made my way in. This was how much loved he was and indeed dearly missed by his flock.

Pope Shenouda III was my spiritual father whom I highly respected. I was in deep awe of him. I always enjoyed hearing him speak; he was very knowledgeable and well read. His knowledge of the Bible astounded me and the Lord gifted him with a very powerful memory. In fact he memorized many parts of the Bible to heart to the extent that he could remember where verses were on a particular page. His sermons were very spiritual and easy to follow for the masses and yet deeply insightful and spiritual at the same time. The scholar could benefit from his words and the simple farmer could also gain a word of benefit. That is by no means an easy task to achieve and yet he was very talented as an eloquent speaker. This gained him the Browning Institute Prize of the "Best preacher in the world" in 1978.

People flocked to the cathedral every Wednesday to hear him speak and millions more watched on satellite TV. He was very witty and funny too. There was always a funny answer to a question that he would give or a comment he would make that would make his audience laugh. It was not laughter as in a comedy show, but in fact was always tasteful and spiritual. Pope Shenouda III loved to laugh and loved to tell jokes and you could see that he was always joyful even in the midst of the most difficult of circumstances such as the burning of churches by extremist elements of the Egyptian society. This joy was not a sign that he brushed such serious issues aside and

trivialized them. No, on the contrary, he was always deeply hurt by such events and took strong stands and stood strong for his children's rights. His light heartedness drew people towards him and despite being the head of the Church, people could relate to this human side of Pope Shenouda III. I think it was a type of release from the difficult issues that he had to face.

He would always say that he never let any problem or difficult situation go deep into his heart and trouble his soul but rather he would deal with all issues externally and not let them hurt his spirit. This indeed was not an easy task but the many years he spent alone in the Egyptian wilderness strengthened his resolve and gave him a resistance and strong will power to deal wisely in all circumstances.

Pope Shenouda III was a profound leader and yet equally a meek man who loved and respected children. He could stand with one child or a group of them and play and joke around with them for an hour and enjoy it immensely. The adults would be standing wanting to discuss many serious issues with the patriarch, and he would be immersed in his time with the children carefree while the adults looked on. He knew they were the future of the Church and deserved his attention and never belittled them but in fact spoke so many times to parents about their duty towards the spiritual nurturing of their children.

He would always say three beautiful sayings, "Rabena Mawgood," (God exists), "kolo lel kheir," (all will be well) and "Masirha ten tehi," (all of this will end some day).

He had an amazing reliance on God and nothing ever fazed him. Even when he was put under house arrest under President Sadat in September 1981, his inner peace prevailed. He would comment that he was “imprisoned in a paradise” as the monastery was his favorite place where he would go for his weekly retreat. In fact the 40 months that he was under house arrest at St Bishoy Monastery were utilized fully for developing the monastery with respect to its buildings and farming. During this period Pope Shenouda III wrote several books among which was “The Life of Repentance and Purity.”

This blessed 117th patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church was a prolific writer and poet. He wrote over 120 books in Arabic of which many have been translated into English and several other languages. Unfortunately many of those English translations are of poor quality and I am extremely happy today that SVS Press along with our new SAC Press have published this new edition of “The Life of Repentance and Purity.” Pope Shenouda the Third’s ascetic poetry in particular is so rich and splendid and full of magnificent spiritual depth. Many of those poems he wrote in his earlier years as well as in the time he spent as a hermit in a cave 16 km from the monastery of the Virgin Mary known as Deir el-Sourian in Scetis.

In my opinion, “The Life of Repentance and Purity” is one of the most profound spiritual writings of Pope Shenouda III. It is a practical book that takes the penitent on a beautiful journey of how to lead such a life of repentance and how to live righteously

before God. It is a topic that we sometimes do not talk about often enough and in particular in the West.

The book covers a detailed number of subjects related to repentance. It is divided into 6 parts and some of the important issues it addresses include a definition of repentance, the incentives for it, its means, the signs of repentance, how to reach purity of heart and how to protect repentance. Pope Shenouda's writings were mainly written in a style that was suited to the general public and appealed to a wide reading audience. Yet at the same time his thoughts were deeply spiritual and of benefit to the Christian scholar as well as to every parishioner who cared to read his works.

My journey with this book dates back to 1989 in Sydney Australia. Pope Shenouda III was planning his greatest pastoral visit to Europe, North America and Australia. A visit that lasted for 112 days and where 10 bishops accompanied him throughout the long journey. I seized this opportunity on this historic and first visit of any Coptic Patriarch to Australia to begin translating the book. I would come home from work each day and spend 4 to 5 hours with the Arabic edition in one hand and a dictionary in the other. The draft was ready by November of 1989 and a copy was given to His Holiness and the first edition was published by C.O.P.T. in 1991 in time for His Holiness' second visit to Australia.

This new edition that is before us today has been 3 years in the making. When Fr John Behr visited Egypt three years ago I approached him on the possibility that

SVS Press could publish a new edition of this book and in fact he was very much open to the idea. A team began working very diligently to assist to improve the original translation and also to add the references to the many patristic quotes mentioned but not cited by Pope Shenouda III in the Arabic original. This was indeed a laborious task. So I am deeply indebted to the committee dedicated to translation under the guidance of the Very Reverend Fr Athanasius Farag and the Reverend Fr Bishoy Mikhail at Saint Antonious and Saint Mina Coptic Orthodox Church in East Rutherford, New Jersey.

The contributors to this edited translation include:

- Phoebe Farag Mikhail, Writer and Writing Instructor (thoroughly edited English translation, authored some explanatory notes, researched references for liturgical and patristic quotes in the text)
- Mary Morgan, United Nations Translator (retired) (reviewed edited version against the original Arabic)
- Omneya Amir Risk El-Far, reviewer (reviewed edited version against the original Arabic, researched some references for patristic quotes in the text)
- Sola Armanious, English as a Second Language Instructor (reviewed edited sections against the original Arabic)

I am also deeply grateful to the wonderful and amazing staff of SVS Press in particular to Fr Benedict Churchill and for his meticulousness in reading over the text and suggesting insights for particular words or phrases in English that would better suit

the Arabic meaning. As for Deacon Gregory Hatrak and Michael Soroka, they both have been a delight and joy to work with on this project. I have thoroughly enjoyed this journey with both of them and thank you immensely for making this book happen and in this beautiful rendition.

I would also like to thank the small delegation from St Athanasius College that have come all the way from Melbourne to share in this occasion and thank them for their valuable support.

To finish, I would also like to say that I love the cover photo of Pope Shenouda III which graces this book. It is very befitting of this book and the subject. It was taken in 2009 during President Obama's speech at Cairo University. It is a striking image that has become very popular among Copts. If you look closely at the eyes of Pope Shenouda III they say many things that I will leave you to contemplate on.

On behalf of St Athanasius Coptic Orthodox Theological College and SAC Press I would like to present this small gift to St Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary and to SVS Press. It is an icon of St Irenaeus of Lyon which was especially written for this occasion by Mother Veronica of Archangel Michael Monastery in Melbourne, Australia. I know how dear this blessed patristic father is to St Vladimir's and also to Fr John Behr. So I kindly ask Fr John to accept this gift on behalf of St Vladimir's as a small token of our appreciation. Thank you.