

PASTORAL MESSAGES SERIES



# ON THE SOUL AND BODY

POPE ALEXANDER I OF ALEXANDRIA

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY HIS GRACE BISHOP SERAPION

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On the Soul and Body

by Pope Alexander I of Alexandria

Coptic Orthodox Diocese of Los Angeles, Southern California, and Hawaii

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# PREFACE

With great joy and enthusiasm, we present to you, beloved reader, the following homily, *On the Soul and Body*, by Pope Alexander I, the 19th Patriarch of Alexandria (d. April 17, 326).

According to the Synexarium of the Coptic Orthodox Church, Pope Alexander was born in Alexandria to Christian parents and served the church from an early age. He was ordained an oghnostos ("reader") by Pope Maximous, a deacon by Pope Theonas, and a priest by Pope Peter the Seal of Martyrs. He was a celibate priest who remained a virgin and chaste.

When the martyrdom of Pope Peter drew near, Alexander and Achillas, who both later became patriarchs, visited Pope Peter in prison and requested him to lift the excommunication of the heretic, Arius, who did not recognize the Divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ. In response, Pope Peter excommunicated Arius again in their presence and informed them that Christ had appeared to him and ordered him not to receive Arius in the church again. He commanded the priests in Egypt not to receive Arius. He also told them that Achillas would be patriarch after him, and Alexander would be patriarch after Achillas.

Despite Pope Peter's command, the newly ordained patriarch, Pope Achillas, received Arius. He lived only six months and departed.

After Pope Alexander was enthroned, he reiterated the excommunication of Arius, who escaped from Egypt to Palestine and Asia Minor while sending letters of complaints to the bishops in these areas. Emperor Constantine convened the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D. with the attendance of Pope Alexander. Under his leadership and the efforts of St. Athanasius, who was a deacon at the time and who would succeed Pope Alexander as Patriarch of Alexandria, Arius was formally excommunicated by the Council. Pope Alexander assisted in the proclamation of the Nicene Creed and many of the church canons that are in effect to the present day. He also mentored St. Athanasius the Apostolic, who wrote many papal decrees and synodical decisions on his behalf.

As patriarch, he also responded to several important issues facing the church, including the dating of Easter, the actions of Meletius of Lycopolis, and the lasting Arian controversy. After shepherding the flock and defending the faith for almost sixteen years, he departed in peace.

The following homily is one of the few writings of Pope Alexander in existence today. It comes to us in two manuscripts from the British Museum. One manuscript contains a long Coptic version of this homily that has been historically attributed to St. Athanasius while another contains a shorter Syriac version that attributes the homily to Pope Alexander. We present this homily without expressing an opinion as to its authorship, for there is no doubt this homily was written by one of the great saints of the church and defenders of the faith, whether Pope Alexander or Pope Athanasius.

In this wonderful homily, the author speaks about man's condition ("For when was it well with man?") and God's response to the enemy that opposes man ("Now, after all this bondage to death and corruption of manhood, God has visited His creature, which He formed after His own image and likeness, and this He has done that it might not forever be the amusement of death"). The author then proceeds to reveal to the reader the awe and wonder of Christ's redeeming work and resurrection from the dead ("Then the Lord, the third day after His death, rose again, thus bringing man to a knowledge of the Trinity").

May our Lord Jesus Christ, through His saving work and glorious Resurrection, enlighten our minds that we may see the blessings of the Resurrection and live according to the promise of eternal life for the glory of His Name, now and forever, Amen.

Bishop Serapion  
Glorious Feast of the Resurrection 2009

# Homily on the Soul and Body

*In the Name of the Holy Trinity, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.*

The Word, which is freely sent down from heaven, is suited for the irrigation of our hearts, if we have been prepared for His power, not only by speaking, but by listening. For as the rain without the ground does not produce fruit, neither does the Word bring into fruition without hearing, nor hearing without the Word. Moreover, the Word becomes fruitful when we pronounce it, and in the same way, hearing becomes fruitful when we listen. Therefore, since the Word manifests His power, do you also freely lend your ears, and when you come to hear, cleanse yourselves from all ill-will and unbelief? Two very bad things are ill-will and unbelief, both of which are contrary to righteousness; for ill-will is opposed to charity, and unbelief is opposed to faith, just as, in the same way, bitterness is opposed to sweetness, darkness to light, evil to good, death to life, falsehood to truth. Those, therefore, who are full of these bad qualities that are against virtue are in a manner dead. The malignant and unbelieving hate charity and faith, and they who do this are the enemies of God.

Since, therefore, you know, my beloved brothers, that the malignant and the unbelieving are the enemies of righteousness, beware of these things. Embrace faith and charity, by which all the holy men who have existed from the beginning of the world to this day and attained salvation. Show the fruit of charity, not only in words, but also in deeds, that is, in all godly patience for God's sake. For, see! the Lord Himself has shown His charity towards us, not only in words but also in deeds, since He has given Himself up as the price of our salvation. Besides, we were not created, like the rest of the world, by word alone, but also by deed. For God made the world to exist by the power of a single word, but us He produced by the power of His word and deed alike. For it was not enough for God to say, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness..." (Genesis 1:26), but rather, His deed followed word; for, taking the dust from the ground, He formed man out of it, conformable to His image and likeness, and into him He breathed the breath of life, so that Adam became a living soul.

But when, afterwards, man became inclined to death by his fall, it was necessary that the form should be recreated anew to salvation by the same Creator. For man's body indeed lay rotting in the ground after death, but his soul, which had been as the breath of life, was detained separately in a dark place

called Hades. There was, therefore, a division of the soul from the body; the soul was banished to the inferno while the body turned into dust, and there was a great interval of separation between them. For the body, by the dissolution of the flesh becomes corrupt while the soul ceases to act when it is loosened from the body. It is as when the king is enslaved, the city falls to ruin, or when the captain is thrown off, the ship sinks; so when the soul is enslaved, its body goes to pieces; as the city without its king, the members of the body are dissolved; as with an army whose general is lost, they are drowned in death, as happens to a ship deprived of its captain. The soul, therefore, governed the man as long as the body survived, as the king governs the city, the general the army, and the captain his ship. But the soul was powerless to rule the body from the time when the body was immovably united with the soul and became immersed in error. Therefore it was that the body fell out of the straight path and followed temptations, giving heed to fornication, idolatry, and murder, which all destroy the proper manhood. The soul itself, carried at length to the lower regions, was detained there by the wicked tempter. Else was it inclined, as the king restores the ruined city, the general collects the dispersed army, the sailor repairs the broken ship, even so, I say, the soul used to minister supplies to the body before it was dissolved in the dust, being not as yet itself bound with chains. After that, the soul became bound, not with material chains, but with the chains of sin, and thus was rendered powerless to act. It then left its body in the ground, and being cast down into the lower regions, it was made the footstool of death, and despicable to all.

Man went forth from paradise to a region which was the den of unrighteousness, fornication, adultery, and cruel murder. And there he found his destruction, for all things conspired to his death and worked the ruin of him who had hardly entered there. Meanwhile, man wanted some consolation, assistance, and rest. For when was it well with man? In his mother's womb? But when he was shut up there, he differed only a little from those that are dead. Was it well for him when he was nourished with milk from the breast? No, not even then did he feel any joy. Was it well for him while he was growing up into maturity? No, for it was especially dangerous for him during this time due to his youthful lusts. Was it well for man, lastly, when he grew old? No, for then he began to grow, being pressed down by the weight of old age and the expectation of death. For what else is old age but the expectation of death? Verily all the inhabitants of the earth do die, young men and old, little children and adults, for no age or bodily stature is exempt from death. Why, then, is man tormented by this exceeding grief? Without doubt, the very aspect of death brings for sadness, for we behold

in a dead man the face changed, the figure dead, the body shrunk up with emaciation, the mouth silent, the skin cold, the carcass prostrate on the ground, the eyes sunken, the limbs immovable, the flesh wasted away, the veins congealed, the bones whitened, the joints dissolved - all parts of him reduced to dust - and the man no longer existing. What, then, is man? A flower, I say, but only for a little while. He is a flower that is not apparent in his mother's womb, which flourishes in his youth, but withers in old age and departs in death.

Now, after all this bondage to death and corruption of manhood, God has visited His creature, which He formed after His own image and likeness, and this He has done that it might not forever be the amusement of death. Therefore, God sent down from heaven His incorporeal Son to take flesh upon Him in the Virgin's womb; and thus, equally as you, He was made man to save lost man and collect all his scattered members. For Christ, when he joined the human flesh to His person, united that which death by the separation of the body had dispersed. Christ suffered that we should live forever.

Otherwise, why should Christ have died? Had He done anything worthy of death? Why did He Who was invested with glory clothe Himself in flesh? And since He was God, why did He become man? And since He reigned in heaven, why did He come down to earth and become incarnate in the virgin's womb? What necessity, I ask, forced God to come down to earth, to assume flesh, to be wrapped in swaddling clothes in a manger-cradle, to be nourished with the milk from the breast, to receive baptism from a servant, to be lifted up upon the cross, to be buried in an earthly tomb, to rise again the third day from the dead? What necessity, I ask, forced Him to this? He suffered shame for man's sake, to set him free from death. He exclaimed, as in the words of the prophet, "I have held My peace a long time, I have been still and restrained Myself. Now I will cry like a woman in labor, I will pant and gasp at once" (Isaiah 42:14). For our sakes, in very deed did He endure sorrow, ignominy, torment, even death itself, and burial. For thus He says Himself through the prophet, "I went down into the deep" (Jonah 2:4). Who made Him thus go down? The impious people. Behold, you sons of men, behold how Israel repaid Him! She killed her Benefactor, returning evil for good, affliction for joy, and death for life. They killed Him Who had brought to life their dead, had healed their sick, had made their lepers clean, had given light to their blind by nailing Him to the cross. Behold, you sons of men! behold, all you people, these new wonders! They suspended Him on the tree Who stretches out the earth; they pierced Him Who laid firm the foundation of the world with nails; they circumscribed Him Who circumscribed the heavens; they bound Him Who forgives sinners; they gave Him vinegar to



drink Who has made them to drink of righteousness; they fed Him with gall Who has offered to them the Bread of Life; they caused corruption to come upon His hands and feet Who healed their hands and feet; they violently closed His eyes Who restored sight to them; they gave Him over to the tomb Who raised their dead to life both in the time before His passion and also while He was hanging on the tree.

For when our Lord was suffering upon the cross, the tombs were burst open, the infernal region was disclosed, the souls leapt forth, the dead returned to life, and many of them were seen in Jerusalem while the mystery of the cross was being perfected, the time when our Lord trampled upon death, dissolved the enmity, bound the strong man, and raised the trophy of the cross, His body being lifted up upon it, that the body might appear on high, and death to be trampled under the foot of flesh. Then the heavenly powers wondered, the angels were astonished, the elements trembled, every creature was shaken while they looked on this new mystery, and the terrific spectacle which was being enacted in the universe. Yet the entire people, as unconscious of the mystery, exulted over Christ in derision, although the earth was rocking, the mountains, valleys, and seas were shaken, and every creature of God was smitten with confusion. The lights of heaven were afraid, the sun fled away, the moon disappeared, the stars withdrew their shining, the day came to end. The angel departed from the temple after the veil was torn in two, and darkness covered the earth on which its Lord has closed His eyes. Meanwhile, hell was beautiful with light, for to that place the Star descended. The Lord, indeed, did not descend into hell in His body, but in His Spirit. He is indeed working everywhere, for while He raised the dead by His body, by His spirit He was liberating their souls. For when the body of the Lord was hung upon the cross, the tombs, as we have said, were opened; hell was unbarred. The dead received their life, the souls were sent back again into the world, because the Lord had conquered hell, had trampled down death, had covered the enemy with shame. Therefore it was that the souls came forth from Hades, and the dead appeared upon the earth.

You see, therefore, how great was the effect of the death of Christ, for no creature endured His fall with equal mind, nor did the elements endure His passion, neither did the earth retain His body, nor hell His Spirit. All things in the Passion of Christ were disturbed and convulsed. The Lord exclaimed, as once before to Lazarus, "Come forth, you dead, from your tombs and your secret places, for I, the Christ, give unto you resurrection." For then the earth could not long hold the body of our Lord that was buried in it, but it exclaimed, "O my Lord, pardon my iniquities, save me from Your wrath, absolve me from the

curse, for I have received the blood of the righteous and yet I have not covered the bodies of men or Your own body!" What is this wonderful mystery? Why, O Lord, did You come down to earth, unless it was for man's sake, who has been scattered everywhere: has Your fair image been disseminated in every place? No! but if you should give but one little word, at that instant all bodies would stand before You. Now, since You have come to earth, and have sought for the members of Your fashioning, undertake for man who is Your own, receive that which is committed to You, recover Your image, Your Adam.

Then the Lord, the third day after His death, rose again, thus bringing man to a knowledge of the Trinity. Then all the nations of the human race were saved by Christ. One submitted to the judgment and many thousands were forgiven. Moreover, He, being made like the man whom He had saved, ascended to the height of heaven to offer before His Father, not gold or silver, or precious stones, but the man whom He had formed after His own image and likeness. And the Father, raising Him to His right hand has seated Him upon a throne on high, and has made Him to be judge of the peoples, the leader of the angelic host, the charioteer of the cherubim, the Son of the true Jerusalem, the Virgin's spouse, and King forever and ever, Amen.