

Sunday, December 25, 2016

## Vital Vigils (2)

In the previous article, I mentioned **several specific instances from the life and teachings of our Lord Jesus which promote the importance and necessity of keeping vigils**. In this article, I would like to share with you **some stories about the vigils of our church fathers and discuss how we can practice and benefit from vigil in our personal prayer life**.



St. John Cassian, a father from Europe who visited Egypt in the late fourth century to learn from the experiences of the Coptic desert fathers, observed an interesting phenomenon which I find particularly relevant to keeping vigils. (He recorded more of his experiences in Egypt in two books entitled “Institutes” and “Conferences of the Desert Fathers.”) He related the following story of one of the elders:

“Once when I was talking to some brothers on a helpful topic, they were overcome by sleep so deep, that they could not even move their eyelids any longer. Then, wishing to show them the power of the devil, I introduced a trivial subject of conversation. Immediately, they woke up, full of joy. Then I said to them with many sighs, ‘Until now, we were discussing heavenly things and your eyes were heavy with sleep, but when I embarked on a useless discourse, you all woke up with alacrity. Therefore, brothers, I implore you to pay attention to yourselves, and guard yourselves from the desire to sleep when you are doing or listening to something spiritual.’”

Based upon the experiences shared by St. John Cassian, I think we should be able to **discern between the “artificial” tiredness planted by the demons versus the natural desire of our bodies to sleep**. This phenomenon is relevant to vigils because, from my own personal experience, I have observed that we have no problem staying up late at a friend’s house or watching a late night movie, but sometimes, we struggle to stay awake during sermons, Liturgies, reading of the Bible, midnight praises, etc. In order to improve our personal prayer life, we should be honest with ourselves and judge the root cause of our tiredness; we ought to pluck out and fight against the “artificial” tiredness planted by the devil while nurturing the body with an appropriate amount of sleep, which differs from person to person.

Our beloved Coptic ancestors, the desert fathers and mothers, enjoyed prayer to the extent that they preferred to keep vigil over sleep. Because of their intense love for God, they trained their bodies over decades of asceticism to make due with very little sleep. Perhaps the most well-known example is **St. Pishoy** who kept routine vigils by tying his hair to the roof of his cave. Another saint well known for his vigils is **St. Arsenius**. It is mentioned that **St. Arsenius** would turn his back to the setting sun on Saturday and continue in prayer with his hands lifted until the sunrise of Sunday morning.

The purpose of sharing the stories of these saints, even though are very extreme examples, is **to inspire us and teach us the importance of vigils**. Although we **might NOT be able to imitate the duration of their vigils**, we **CAN learn from their practices**. **The great efforts of St. Pishoy teach us the importance of maintaining our spiritual rule**. **Even if we feel tired, we should be committed to offering a short prayer or parts of the Agpeya before we sleep**. We can learn from **St. Arsenius to reserve Saturday evening and Sunday for the Lord**. **Let us make an effort to routinely attend Saturday Vespers (7-8 pm) and the midnight praises (typically 8-10 pm) at the church**. **Consider these services the extent of our practice of vigils**. The late Reverend **Fr. Bishop Kamel** used to say, **“It is difficult for a Christian to practice spiritual vigils apart from the church vigils”** so let us take advantage of church’s wisdom and attend the vigils it has foreordained. **I hope and pray we benefit from the vigils of this blessed month, and continue to keep vigilant throughout the year**.

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