

Dear Beloved,

Peace and grace of our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ!

I want to take this opportunity to bring to light some things that God has put in my heart to share with the sheep He has entrusted me with for so many years. I'm sure many of you have heard that I have resigned from my position at St. Mark's. There is a Godly reason behind this resignation and my prolonged silence, which I will go on to explain in this letter. The only reason I have said nothing this far is because I wanted to avoid putting anyone, especially the church leaders in a negative light. I was willing to avoid that at any cost – even at the cost of my reputation. But one cost that I was unwilling to bear was that you be stumbled by all this. That is why I am writing you this letter, in order to clarify false accusations that may have reached you.

First thing to have in mind is that there is a lot of behind the scene stuff that only very few involved people are aware of. I will mention some of these scenes which are relevant. Since I began my ministry at St. Mark's, I became aware that the main blessing that was received from God for the church was tied to the unity of the leaders (clergy). This belief grew more and more in me the more I witnessed its power. Unfortunately, the enemy hit this unity in the past few years. It was something that killed me everyday. We were able to make things work on the outside, but each of us had a different vision and weren't able to see things eye to eye. It is something that delayed spiritual and physical growth of the church. I took it as a spiritual exercise that God wanted me to grow in love, as I have always learned that love comes before ministry. And indeed, through the grace of God, I did grow spiritually by humbling myself and trying to accommodate as much as I could.

Later on, I was forced to take 6 months off due to an illness. But as I learned, I looked for God's will in such a circumstance. I focused this time on praying and seeking a vision for St. Mark's and for myself. I was humbled by God's presence during this time and was willing to do anything for the church. I met with the clergy and the board of deacons upon my return from the sabbatical and I informed them that I would like to step down from the leadership and just become a priest with them, and that I will submit to the leader, whoever that person may be. I did this in order to focus more on the people and discipleship rather than the administration that took a big part of my time.

Things didn't improve from there but got worse and worse, and the enemy used all the differences to attack the church. At the beginning of Advent, I got a complaint from the Pope's office about discipleship groups, the consecrated brothers (Shady and Amir) and a complaint that we invited Dr. Atef Aziz (will explain who he is later on in the letter) to a retreat in our church (which never happened). I responded to the complaint and never heard back, so we just kept going but I knew the end would be coming soon! I had just started a new discipleship group; I thought it might help if I cancel this group until things calm down. I canceled this group even though this is the most fruitful service I have ever experienced in my 20 years of ministry. The consecrated brothers also had given us a notice (as soon as I came back from Sabbatical)

that they would like to leave in order to start a new mission somewhere else; I told them to leave earlier than they were planning to calm things down and they did.

All of this didn't improve things, but they were getting worse. On January 5<sup>th</sup>, Irinie, my wife, got a call from Bishop Karas to stop all her discipleship groups. On the same day in the evening the fathers met with me.

They told me that the Pope's office along with some bishops from the U.S. had been contacting them to check on the status of the church and the involvement of Dr. Atef Aziz and his teachings. They told me that my teachings were similar to his and connected my sabbatical to his seclusion. Another complaint was one that came from parents (of adult men and women) who were concerned that their kids were becoming 'extreme' – i.e. prayed too much – in their spirituality.

At this point I did not feel defensive or offended. I was willing to seek out any mistakes on my part and grow. I asked what exactly the wrong teaching was so that I can fix it. I wanted to know from anyone directly instead of hearing things from third parties. I also wondered why the bishops and the Pope's office was not willing to contact me directly? From the beginning, all information was relayed to me through a third party. It wasn't until I left that I started receiving messages directly.

Their answer was that there was no actual problem with the teachings, but the problem was that the disciples of this "spirit" felt superior to others, which will separate them from the church and make them extreme. They said that we were wrong to *meet in secret* and *have selective groups*.

At this point, I became defensive on behalf of the people they spoke of. I told them that the kids that they are talking about are the first people at church in all liturgical prayer. Plus, these groups are open to all people and have nothing exclusive. There is nothing in secret and they know this. But now, these happenings and lack of unity and accusations are what will SEPARATE THEM FROM CHURCH. I asked them what they wanted from me if there was no wrong teaching?

Their response was a list of demands that completely disabled my service:

- ***No more discipleship groups***
- ***I will no longer lead any retreats alone***
- ***no more personal time off (which I also needed for my treatment)***
- ***I need to get a phone (I didn't have a cell phone)***
- ***All things are to be done at church and together***
- ***And worst of all, I would have to write a statement to the congregation telling them about the wrong "spirit" that came to church and how we will fix it ... and send this statement to the Pope***

I knew at that point that my options weren't many if I were to stay true to the service that God has entrusted me over. But still, to take things in prayer first, I asked them to give me a couple of days to think about it. After receiving the confirmation that I needed, I submitted my resignation for retirement on January 8<sup>th</sup> to the Pope, clergy and to the board of deacons. As I'm truly sick with a sickness that will end with disability, I thought to use this excuse to leave peacefully without causing any problems in the church. I could have asked to be moved to another church but I thought this would hurt my spiritual children. I recently heard a rumor stating that I left out of fear of being excommunicated. This is 100% false, I never did anything deserving of excommunication and even if so, my reaction would never be to run.

I knew that my resignation wouldn't be accepted easily. And indeed, there has been various manipulations and pressures for me to return. But, I disappeared in order to confirm that my decision is final as it is confirmed by many events that have been happening over the past few years and not an emotional decision. There have been ridiculous assumptions going around regarding my sanity and about being misled as if I am still an adolescent. I want to reassure you that this decision was one that I made in complete obedience to God and nothing else. It is His way of guiding me to the specific road He has for me and furthermore, and more importantly, His continued sanctification of my soul.

Now, regarding Dr. Atef Aziz (now Fr. Seraphim) and his group:

Fr. Seraphim is currently a respected monk in the Eastern Orthodox Church who started off as a consecrated deacon in the Coptic church. After many years in the ascetic life, Fr. Seraphim began to pass down the way he received. He taught mainly from the early fathers about the deep treasures of the Coptic Church and about restoring the image of God in us (taking off the old man and putting on the new one). Within his teachings, he at times mentioned the poor spiritual state of the Church. For this reason, he was asked to stop his teachings, and when his teachings still spread through his actual practice and the practice of those who received the way, he was excommunicated. Now I know that this will resound in a negative way with many of you. But, before you allow the logic of your mind take over, please take this information in prayer, considering the following:

- Fr. Matthew the poor, who is now considered a reliable source of spiritual light, was also criticized for speaking about the condition of the church.
- St. John Chrysostom was excommunicated according to Palladius (4-5<sup>th</sup> century church historian) by 36 bishops (29 of them were Coptic)
- Pope Tawadros himself attempted to restore this excommunication of Dr. Atef Aziz, but some of the bishops stood in his way

Now, in regard to my relation to Fr. Seraphim and his group:

I met Fr. Seraphim for the first time in the fall of 2011 and I found him to be a very humble and holy man with great background of the teaching and life of the early fathers, as well as unbelievable depth in the bible. His sermons are all online, among all other Christian sermons,

from which we choose what holds true in our Orthodox faith. And in this case, I never found anything deviating one degree from the teaching of the church and the early fathers. All things that I taught were things that helped me personally and that which I believed would be beneficial for the congregation, even if that material was said by Fr. Seraphim. And even though I'm very confident in Fr. Seraphim's teachings, I never gave his books or website to anyone at St. Mark's, respecting the position of the church that I served in.

I also met Brother Amir in Egypt in 2011. Brother Amir mentioned to me that he is relocating to the US and I offered him to come and spend 2 months at church and stay in the house next door. He did come, along with Brother Shady (another consecrated brother), and they stayed for 2 months. After the 2 months, we the clergy (myself, Fr. Anthony and Fr. Paul) liked them and offered them to stay and serve as deacons at church and stay in the house next to church. I never mentioned that they belong to Fr. Seraphim (Dr. Atef Aziz) consecration group because the brothers were never excommunicated but were still part of the Coptic church. It was also a perfect fit from God as we had a church guard who kept the church's key and stayed on the premises (Boutros) and he left during their 2 months of visit. Because they were willing to stay in the house and open and close the church every day, we thought that this would be a good replacement for Boutros, and we would pay them both the amount we were paying him (they live according to the poverty vow).

Fr. Domadius later joined the church in the fall of 2011 and he was aware that these brothers belong to the consecration group of Atef Aziz. He never mentioned anything against them, but only wished they would be more involved in pastoral ministry (outreaching people).

Now concerning the discipleship groups we had at church:

As I mentioned, this is the most fruitful service that I have experienced in my priesthood. And as such, we have seen the enemy rise in wrath against it. From ridiculous name calling such as "cults", "extremes", "brainwashers", etc. This is indeed disrespect to the people who were in these groups. I think our men and women are smarter than this and can discern (to which I know that people may say, "No they have no experience," and yet I disagree and believe they can discern for themselves and taste for themselves). Anyhow, here are some facts about these groups:

1) I started these groups in 2012 using a famous program called Radical Mentoring ([www.radicalmentoring.com](http://www.radicalmentoring.com)) to train young men (late 20's) in how to live their manhood and be the men, husbands, servants and leaders that God wants them to be. The curriculum was from that mentoring program at first but I kept adapting it to our church (using Orthodox books instead of the Christian books they recommended). These groups were the most fruitful thing I ever did in my ministry. In our meetings, we prayed the Agpeya, had a talk (sometimes discussion) and finally I had every man pray a personal prayer at the end. I did these groups at home and I would do one group per year (8-12 men each) by invitation (sometimes by recommendation of other people or former groups), in order to keep the same demographics (single or married, have children or not and age, etc.) The topics of these groups were covering

the practical aspect of any man's life: Leadership, Manhood, Fatherhood, Making Decisions, Prayer, Time Management, etc.

2) As I started to mentor married men I found the need for their wives to be on the same page. At the request of their wives, my wife started to make a discipleship group for their wives, and this was a great blessing as the couples learned to pray together the Agpeya with their children and have a family altar. The fathers of the church were aware of these groups and were praising how these families were advancing spiritually up until a certain point.

3) The purpose of these groups mainly is to "hand down" (تسليم), meaning: instead of telling someone to pray, you pray with them; instead of general learning, we go into specifics of our lives and how to face them. And this is why it had to be small and personal, going deep into the heart NOT just the behavior (the inner man that St. Paul spoke about and was highlighted in the letters of St. Anthony, St. Macarius the great and many of early church fathers). The way of the inner man is what the western churches are trying to learn now from our church fathers (check the famous book *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*). You can fight a certain behavior forever and not win the battle (that's how many of our youth are addicted to pornography and can't get rid of many sins); yet the solution, as the fathers taught, is in growing the new man that we received in baptism through the word of God and through the prayers of the church (Sacraments, Agpeya, Bible, Tasbeha, etc.). That's what we taught and what we practiced (as it's the only thing that made a difference in my personal life)!!!!

4) These groups made youth want to attend prayer more: liturgies, Tasbeha, Agpeya, personal prayers; some of them were attending daily liturgies at Pope Kyrillos church (which has daily liturgy). There is a great spiritual growth amongst the youth and families (parents praying with their kids, men taking their role in the house, etc.). The devil was envious of that and unfortunately he used the leaders to fight it (which is not a new thing)!

5) Some false statements say that we (leaders of these discipleship groups) had people do prayers beyond their means (extremism). I have never asked anyone to do any prayer beyond the grace that was given to him by God. And when we saw that someone was having a hard time with their spiritual rule, we always revised and tried to fit the spiritual means and grace of each individual. Kids and youth were drawn to spiritual time and prayers; they were the ones who wanted to meet and pray instead of socializing, as they found this is the only way to get out of their weaknesses. Yet now they are told that this is too much and a heresy!

Other accusations in my regard are:

- I'm an extremist and I'm pro ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria)!!!
- I'm discouraging people from marriage!
- I have given a date for the end of the world!
- I'm brainwashing people ... etc.

These are just some examples of the things that I heard the past few days and maybe there are more, for which there is no proof. I believe that all this is happening at this specific time as the

enemy sees the fruit budding in the souls of people. He feels threatened by it and so, as he has been used to doing throughout the years, he is attacking from inside the church. Even our Lord Jesus Himself was crucified by His own scribes and Pharisees and His own nation.

We need to fight the enemy instead of fighting each other! It pains me to see things such as prayer, fasting, prostrations and love being called brainwashing, while our congregation and youth (like the rest of the world) are plagued with pornography, anxiety, addictions, and many strongholds with no real aid.

My dream, coming back from the Sabbatical was to do endless retreats for all age groups, to bathe people in the presence of God and to help them find healing and restoration. My dream was to expand discipleship groups to all ages, to those who want to take their spiritual lives to the next level of growth, and give endless chances for people to come together in their homes to worship and praise and grow steadily through guidance. I was dreaming that those who have been receiving guidance for a few years now could help the younger generation, who is drowning in grave addictions and being sucked fast into the world. I was dreaming to do all I could to use the ones who have been disciplined to reach out to the rest of the people and spread the light. But this was no longer an option for me.

Unfortunately, the bishops and clergy of the US, along with parents of the adults who are living a high calling of consecration for the sake of the younger generation, are all feeling that I am a great threat to the Coptic church and that I need to stop all these teachings. They want me back badly just because my absence will cause a turbulence in the church; they want me to come back, but not to serve on any capacity except pray liturgies and possibly take confessions.

I refuse to take a monthly salary and simply work, I want to serve God with the freedom of the children of God. That's why I had no option but to resign.

I cannot apologize for the work of the Holy Spirit in you who have followed God with a sincere heart. If I did that then you would lose everything you have been given. God is my witness that I have never given you anything outside the sound of the teaching of the Orthodox Church. We have experienced God's work together, please don't neglect or doubt that! Take your doubts to God, and He will answer, but do not let the enemy steal your testimony from you. And if you need anything or have any questions, I am here for you.

This letter was only to help you in any way I can from my position. I know that all this is overwhelming; I urge you to stay away from church politics and focus on Christ alone. Please support the weak souls of the church by being firm in your faith, continuing in your prayer and not saying anything negative about anyone. This is time of prayer not rumors! I know that you still may see me leaving as a negative thing but we know very well that "All things work together for good to those who love God," (Romans 8:28).

I have not abandoned you and will never forget you; I know that God will take care of you in His own way. The spiritual bond between us that God has built, no man can take away!

Even if your faith was weak during this time and even if you find yourself denying the work of God at times, don't worry - the disciples also did the same but they were restored by the resurrection. May God bring resurrection out of this death and confirm us in the Orthodox faith to the last breath. Amen.

Love in Christ,  
Fr. Bishoy