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WYBRANE ASPEKTY MODLITWY CHRZE CIJA SKIEJ W DZIEŁACH MATTA EL-MASKINE (1919–2006)

SELECTED ASPECTS OF CHRISTIAN PRAYER IN THE WORKS OF MATT EL -MASKINE (1919–2006)

Streszczenie

Artykuł przedstawia wybrane aspekty koncepcji modlitwy według współczesnego koptyjskiego mnicha Matta el-Maskine (1919–2006). Natura modlitwy i jej rola w kształtowaniu postawy chrze cija skiej to pierwsza cz artykułu. Druga cz po wi cona jest owocom modlitwy. Ostatnia cz jest wskazaniem, e Matta el-Maskine ł czył temat modlitwy z wysiłkami ekumenicznymi i widział ich wzajemne powi zanie. Gł bokie uj cie modlitwy zawarte w dziełach Matta el-Maskine, a jednocze nie ukazanie jej w wielu kontekstach społecznych sprawia, e mo emy uzna tego autora za współczesnego mistrza duchowo ci chrze cija skiej, który doskonale ł czy do wiadczenie z wiedzy , tradycj Wschodu z tradycj Zachodu, a tak e teologi z yciem codziennym.

Słowa kluczowe: Matta el-Maskine, modlitwa, ekumenizm

Abstract

The article presents selected aspects of the concept of prayer according to the contemporary Coptic monk Matt el-Maskine (1919–2006). The nature of prayer and its role in shaping the Christian attitude is the first part of the article. The second part is devoted to the fruits of prayer. The last part is an indication that Matta el-Maskine connected the topic of prayer with ecumenical efforts and saw their interconnection. The deep understanding of prayer contained in Matt el-Maskine's works and at the same time showing it in many social contexts makes us consider this author a contemporary master of Christian spirituality who perfectly combines experience with knowledge, the tradition of the East with the tradition of the West, as well as theology with everyday life.

Keywords: Matta el-Maskine, prayer, ecumenism

Introduction

The theology of prayer has undergone significant development within the Church over centuries. Contemporary theologians continue to explore and highlight new dimensions of this spiritual practice. Among these theologians is the relatively obscure figure of the Coptic monk, Father Matt el-Maskine (Arabic: Little Matthew) (1919–2006), born Youssef Iskandar. Initially trained and employed as a pharmacist in Cairo, he later pursued monastic life. His spiritual persona merits attention for various reasons, notably because he was a modern monk living in contemporary times, albeit within a different cultural milieu. He resided in Egypt and is chiefly recognized for revitalizing the Monastery of St. Macarius¹. In the 20th century, the monastery's monastic population had dwindled to six elderly monks. Father Matta el-Maskine, along with a group of monks, initially lived in the caves of the Wadi el Rayan desert (approximately 50 km from Fayoum) for ten years, adhering to an austere lifestyle reminiscent of the early desert fathers. At the behest of Patriarch Cyril VI (1959-1971), Matta el-Maskine and his fellow monks relocated from Wadi el Rayan to the Monastery of St. Macarius. Under his leadership, they rejuvenated the monastery both spiritually and architecturally². The monks introduced modern reclamation and farming methods, leading to a significant transformation of the desert landscape. Today, the monastery hosts several dozen monks who live in the spirit of the Desert Fathers, particularly following the Rule of Pachomius. The monastery has become a pilgrimage site for those seeking spiritual renewal.

The restoration of the Monastery of St. Macarius by Father Matta el-Maskine is part of a broader renewal movement within the Coptic Church in Egypt. This renaissance is particularly attributed to Patriarchs Cyril VI and Shenouda III. Scholars of the Coptic Church attribute the success of this ecclesiastical revival to the high quality of Christian formation,

¹ The monastery is located on the former Scetian Desert, at Wadi En Natrun, near the road connecting Cairo and Alexandria. It was founded in 360 by St. Macarius the Egyptian, around whom more than four thousand monks from various parts of the world gathered at that time. Since then, the monastery has been continuously inhabited by monks. Matta el-Maskine, *Modlitwa, Duch wi ty i jedno chrze cijan* (Prayer, the Holy Spirit, and the Unity of Christians) (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Benedyktynów Tyniec, 2005), 13.

² The new monastery buildings include over one hundred and fifty cells (each cell containing a workroom, bedroom, bathroom, and kitchen), a large refectory, a new library, and a large guest area with several halls and numerous rooms for retreatants and visiting guests. It is also worth noting that during the renovation of the old buildings, including the church of St. Macarius, the relics of John the Baptist and the prophet Elisha were exhumed, discovered in a crypt under the northern wall of this church, as indicated by manuscripts from the 16th century. el-Maskine, *Modlitwa, Duch wi ty i jedno chrze cijan* (Prayer, the Holy Spirit, and the Unity of Christians), 15. See also Wincenty Myszor, “Koptyjski ko ciół” (The Coptic Church), in *Encyklopedia katolicka* (Catholic Encyclopedia), vol. 9 (Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 2020), 819.

the strong bond between the clergy and the laity, and an intensive liturgical, spiritual, and sacramental life that fosters social and charitable engagement. The work and contributions of Father Matta el-Maskine are integral to this renewal trend.

Father Matta el-Maskine's literary contributions underscore the importance of prayer within spiritual life. His book, *Prayer*, was published in Polish as early as 2000. Another significant work, *Prayer; the Holy Spirit, and the Unity of Christians*, comprises five chapters, including one reprinted from his earlier book, yet the subsequent chapters on the Holy Spirit and Christian unity enrich the discussion on prayer. His third notable work, *Communion of Love*, offers extensive teachings on the effective action of the Holy Spirit throughout the history of salvation. Additionally, his commentary on the liturgy of baptism and the Eucharist, titled *The New Creation of Man*, is pivotal.

In his writings, Father Matta el-Maskine seamlessly integrates prayer with various aspects of spiritual theology. He draws from the Holy Scriptures, his personal experiences, and the writings of the Desert Fathers and other Church Fathers, such as Macarius the Great, Anthony the Hermit, John of Damascus, John Climacus, Isaac the Syrian, John of Kronstadt³, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, and St. Augustine⁴. His approach to prayer is expressed in modern language, yet it remains deeply rooted in the wisdom of Christian Tradition and the specific liturgical practices of the Coptic Church, a longstanding cradle of holy monasticism⁵. Father Matta el-Maskine's works have gained international popularity and have recently found a dedicated readership in Poland. This study will focus on selected aspects of Christian prayer as articulated by Father Matta el-Maskine.

1. Prayer: Nature and Meaning in the Christian Attitude

To grasp the essence of Father Matta el-Maskine's teachings on prayer, it is imperative to briefly outline his thoughts on the concepts of the "new" and "old" man. Father Matta el-Maskine expresses regret that the profound truth about the new creation has been neglected by spiritual masters, asserting that there is insufficient appreciation for this divine work in which God creates His own image in humanity and grants the right to union with Him. Following the original sin, humanity severed its connection with its divine source, resulting in the

³ Matta el-Maskine, *L'expérience de Dieu dans la vie de prière* (The Experience of God in the Life of Prayer) (Bégrolles-en-Mauges: Abbaye de Bellefontaine, 1991), 23–25.

⁴ el-Maskine, *L'expérience de Dieu dans la vie de prière* (The Experience of God in the Life of Prayer), 91–93.

⁵ Kazimierz Matwiejuk, "Liturgia koptyjska" (Coptic Liturgy), in *Ante Deum stantes*, ed. Stefan Koperek (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Unum, 2002), 81–100.

degradation of human knowledge and free will. Consequently, humanity lost its freedom and the capacity to discern the truth that shields it from sin. In response, God recreates humanity in Christ, not from the dust of the earth but from the Spirit. Through the sacrament of baptism, Christ bestows upon us His spiritual body. Thus, within every person exist two realities: the old man, sinful, corruptible, prone to sin, and mortal; and the new man, spiritual, created in the image of Christ.

The new man's privileges include eternal life and a significant advantage in the internal struggle, as "whoever is born of God does not sin, because God's seed abides in him" (1 John 3:9) and "the wicked one will not touch him" (1 John 5:18). This struggle occurs between the flesh and the spirit, between the mind that governs the old body and the spiritual sensitivity of the new man, who is open to God. Humanity's task, therefore, is to live according to the spirit rather than the flesh, as this brings eternal life. The new man, created in holy baptism by the Holy Spirit, develops through prayer. In prayer, one receives divine light, learns God's will, and gains the grace to enact it⁶. Father Matta el-Maskine articulates this in the following words: "When we stand before God, in His Face, we are in reality making the return of the exiled creature to the bosom of its Creator, following the example of Adam returning to Paradise. Prayer is therefore (...) a compensation for the long hours spent away from God, amidst earthly occupations and the worries of temporal life (cf. Lk 21:34)⁷." He emphasizes that this return to God, which occurs in prayer, is not a mere human, natural desire but rather a "vocation" that emanates from God⁸.

Father Matta el-Maskine elaborates that with this divine vocation, the new man is endowed with all necessary "spiritual abilities" to remain perpetually in communion with God. Prayer, particularly continuous prayer, signifies this union, even for those engaged in worldly activities. The author underscores that Christ Himself exemplified the significance of prayer by spending entire nights in prayer. Additionally, the exhortation to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17) encourages linking our moments of prayer to achieve lasting union with God⁹. Christ presents various ways for humanity to encounter God, transcend personal limitations, and maintain His presence despite numerous obstacles. This spiritual vocation to prayer, along with the divine endowments, is essential to prevent the abandonment of prayer. Turning away from prayer towards worldly distractions is an innate tendency of

⁶ Matta el-Maskine, *Modlitwa* (Prayer) (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Benedyktynów Tynieckie, 2000), 49.

⁷ el-Maskine, *Modlitwa* (Prayer), 49.

⁸ el-Maskine, *Modlitwa* (Prayer), 49–50.

⁹ Matta el-Maskine, *Nowe stworzenie człowieka. Nie dziw się, że powiedziałem ci: Trzeba wam się powtórnie narodzić* (J 3,7) (The New Creation of Man. Do Not Be Surprised That I Said to You: You Must Be Born Again (John 3:7)) (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Benedyktynów Tynieckie, 2003), 136.

corrupt human nature. However, when God intervenes in such a nature, a new spiritual being emerges, fears of approaching God dissipate, and the inclination to avoid prayer transforms into a fervent interest: "It is as if some overwhelming force were pushing us to persevere in prayer and adoration. Such is the power of God's love in us."¹⁰

Father Matta el-Maskine, akin to many masters of prayer¹¹, identifies two fundamental elements in the initiation of prayer: awareness of God's presence and recognition of one's own sinfulness. External gestures during prayer, such as bowing, beating the breast, lowering the head, dusting the forehead¹², or kissing the cross, which symbolizes Christ's victory over personal sin and opens the "safe and certain path to the Father¹³," can aid in cultivating this awareness.

It is notable that Father Matta el-Maskine assigns considerable importance to these external gestures, despite modern skepticism towards their efficacy¹⁴. Nevertheless, contemporary theology of Catholic spirituality maintains that prayer should be embodied through signs and gestures¹⁵. A sense of sinfulness should be accompanied by an awareness of the love and mercy of God, who joyfully embraces the returning son or daughter¹⁶. The love that God bestows upon humanity "does not allow him to attach importance to sins or to be discouraged by impurity or uncertainty in man."¹⁷ In prayer, it is essential to be confident not only in God's "passive" presence but also in His "active" presence—God who listens attentively and accepts prayers with pleasure. Therefore, one's faith should be grounded in the faith of the Church rather than the transient feelings that may accompany prayer¹⁸. In the works of Matta el-Maskine, prayer is portrayed as a fundamental act of humility¹⁹. The prayer that pleases God is that of a person who stands before Him with a contrite heart, aware of their own littleness, and prays in secret, not for display (cf. Matthew 6:6). Matta el-Maskine

¹⁰ el-Maskine, *Nowe stworzenie człowieka. Nie dziw si , e powiedziałem ci: Trzeba wam si powtórnie narodzi (J 3,7)* (The New Creation of Man. Do Not Be Surprised That I Said to You: You Must Be Born Again (John 3:7)), 138.

¹¹ The "standing in the presence of God" was emphasized in both Eastern and Western monasticism (see, for example, Benedictine spirituality), as well as in later schools of spirituality (e.g., Ignatian).

¹² In the Coptic liturgy, performing certain gestures during both liturgical and personal prayer is strongly emphasized.

¹³ el-Maskine, *Modlitwa* (Prayer), 33 and 36.

¹⁴ In contemporary spirituality, there are two conflicting tendencies regarding the role of the body in prayer: on one hand, fear of undermining the solemnity due to liturgical celebrations, and on the other hand, the development and interest in practices such as worship dance, particularly in charismatic communities.

¹⁵ Dominik Wider, *Zawsze si módlcie* (Always Pray) (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Karmelitów Bosych, 1999), 85.

¹⁶ el-Maskine, *Modlitwa* (Prayer), 34–35.

¹⁷ el-Maskine, *Modlitwa* (Prayer), 38.

¹⁸ el-Maskine, *Modlitwa* (Prayer), 38–39.

¹⁹ In Christian spirituality, both in its ancient schools and today, humility is treated as the foundation of Christian spiritual life. The Catechism of the Catholic Church mentions it 14 times, almost always first pointing to the humility of the Son of God, and then relating it to the Christian attitude.

identifies the greatest danger in the life of prayer as pride. Human pride is a preferred domain for Satan's activity, which becomes particularly intensified when an individual devotes themselves to prayer. Satan can sometimes discourage a person, or alternatively, lull their heart's vigilance, turning prayer into a pharisaical act—cold, performed for show, and aimed at gaining human praise and admiration. Such prayer, according to the Coptic master, does not challenge the body; on the contrary, the body finds satisfaction in it. An individual overcome by this kind of pride behaves as follows:

"He rises early to perform it publicly and does not feel tired, standing for hours in the presence of people. His voice becomes resonant; a very attentive intelligence helps him articulate prayers with intended content, clarity, and precision, which earn him the admiration of those present. This kind of prayer is pleasant to our human 'self' as it offers a bodily reward: it leads to self-affirmation rather than self-denial, to deification rather than self-mortification. Our 'self' likes this, just as it likes accumulating money. The body never tires of such prayer, just as it never tires of good food."²⁰

Our author emphasized that one should not approach the matter of prayer 'in a bodily manner,' because sooner or later, this will lead to abandoning prayer. The body, having no personal benefit from prayer, will create various obstacles and excuses for abandoning it. Since prayer, as a divine-human work concerning the relationship between God and man, is part of human spiritual development, it is also a form of spiritual struggle. Satan does everything to turn a person away from prayer and from union with God (see CCC 2725). It is crucial, therefore, to remember that one of the planes of the fight against Satan (apart from the fight against the world and sin) is the body. Hence, as our author notes, the condition for fruitful prayer—leading to the meeting of the heart of man with the heart of God, and to the union of the will of man with the will of God—is the asceticism of the body and the fervor of the spirit.

Father Matta el-Maskine distinguishes two types of bodily asceticism: before and during prayer. The first type, negative asceticism, consists of fasting, silence, modesty, simplicity of dress, and performing certain gestures intended to encourage the soul to pray. The second type, positive asceticism, involves offering Christ sincere love from the depth of the heart, expressed in words of attachment and desire, in a continuous dialogue of the heart supported by vigilant meditation on the words and commandments of Christ. "Thanks to these two paths, prayer is not threatened by bitterness or boredom, spiritual lukewarmness, or

²⁰ el-Maskine, *Modlitwa* (Prayer), 39.

distraction.²¹" Christ emphasized the connection between the soul and the body in the life of prayer, noting that the spirit is willing but the body is weak (cf. Mt 26:41).

In this context, Father Matta el-Maskine devotes significant attention to the role of the body in prayer, enumerating various excuses the body uses to avoid the effort of prayer, which is typical in the initial phase of spiritual development. It is crucial to recognize that this is when prayer demands greater effort and commitment, which is not in vain and will yield abundant fruits in the future. This aligns with contemporary reflections on prayer within the theology of spirituality: as Fr. Prof. Jerzy Gogola OCD notes, prayer is not an invitation to inertia but a dialogue²². While the theology of spirituality acknowledges the concept of passivity, it is typically discussed in the context of mystical experience²³. To elucidate the necessity of asceticism in the development of every Christian's prayer life, it is worth citing a broader quote from Father Matta el-Maskine:

"Prayer requires self-denial and the slaying of passions, desires, and false hopes... The body, therefore, invents a thousand pretexts to avoid prayer: it claims to be sick, feeble, that its head, joints, and back ache, that it badly needs sleep. And when a person forces themselves to pray, the body tries to shorten it. If a person persistently strives to say the prayer to the end, the body then tries to escape from the meaning of the words: the tongue gets tangled, attention weakens and wanders here and there, thoughts become sluggish. Our 'I' uses the pretext of the body to escape from the words of prayer because these words bring its death with them. This 'I' is like the snake that avoids the charmer's music and quickly stops its ears so as not to hear his voice, knowing that it brings about its death."²⁴

Therefore, if fervent prayer succeeds in subordinating the corporeal nature of the soul to the extent that it overcomes the temptation to avoid, postpone, or oppose the call of the Spirit, this undoubtedly testifies to the victory of the soul and, as the Author emphasizes, to the complete dominion of God over it²⁵. Such prayer leads to union with God, aligning one's will and desires with His, resulting in complete subordination to the Father. Prayer, therefore, cannot be treated as one of many activities in earthly life; it must not succumb to haste and fatigue. "It is better," as the Coptic monk asserts, "for a man to offer a calm, quiet, and worthy prayer lasting five minutes, than to pray for an hour with haste or for three hours with

²¹ el-Maskine, *Modlitwa* (Prayer), 40.

²² Jerzy Gogola, *Teologia komunii z Bogiem. Synteza teologii duchowo ci* (The Theology of Communion with God. A Synthesis of Spiritual Theology) (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Karmelitów Bosych, 2012), 293.

²³ Giulio D'Urso, "Passività," in *Dizionario di mistica* (Dictionary of Mysticism), ed. Luigi Borriello (Roma: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1998), 989–990.

²⁴ el-Maskine, *Modlitwa* (Prayer), 38.

²⁵ el-Maskine, *Modlitwa* (Prayer), 56–57.

fatigue.²⁶ Only such prayer, an expression of sincere contrition offered in secret, without haste and with a fervent heart, becomes stronger than sin and brings healing to the soul. Prayer, therefore, possesses great power to overcome sin, even though sin may erode much of the strength gained through prayer, it does not annihilate all that is received in prayer. In this manner, prayer births power and joy within man, replacing the sadness and pain caused by sin, thereby healing the soul²⁷.

In "Irenikon" 1 (1977): 5–45, our author published an extensive article on the role of Pentecost in the spiritual life of the Church²⁸, addressing the Holy Spirit's role in prayer.

It should be noted that Fr. Matta el-Maskine's advice on prayer is formulated to be applicable not only to monks but to every person who wishes to embark on the path of prayer. He emphasizes the universality of prayer, drawing from St. Gregory of Nazianzus (†390) who asserted that we must remind ourselves of God "more often than we breathe."²⁹ Is this a feasible directive for individuals living in the modern world, ensnared in a constant whirlwind of duties, haste, and tension? Father Matta el-Maskine asserts that it is not the duration but the quality of prayer, as guided by the Holy Spirit, that measures its fruitfulness³⁰. The Holy Spirit "knows the spiritual needs of man and his temporal constraints. Thus, to a pious person living in the fear of God, He grants the fullness of prayer and its duration, ensuring complete satisfaction of the soul without neglecting one's earthly duties. In the shortest period of time, He bestows the richest and most precious graces, allowing the prayer to conclude at the appropriate moment."³¹

Consistent with the centuries-old tradition of the East, our author frequently emphasizes the Holy Spirit's role in Christian prayer. He asserts that if "prayer is not guided by the Holy Spirit, one ends it disconsolate, lacking inner peace and joy of heart, as if the prayer had not reached God's ear."³² Hence, it is crucial to "first learn to be pleasing to the Holy Spirit, avoiding everything that can hinder the gentleness, holiness, and love of the Spirit. Without this, prayer would lack the strength necessary to bring and offer it to God."³³

²⁶ el-Maskine, *Modlitwa* (Prayer), 44.

²⁷ el-Maskine, *Modlitwa* (Prayer), 59.

²⁸ The translation of the article can be found in: el-Maskine, *Modlitwa, Duch wi ty i jedno chrze cijan* (Prayer, the Holy Spirit, and the Unity of Christians), 69–111.

²⁹ Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) 2697.

³⁰ Matta el-Maskine, *Komunia miło ci* (The Communion of Love) (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Benedyktynów Tyniec, 2008), 216–221.

³¹ el-Maskine, *Modlitwa* (Prayer), 46.

³² el-Maskine, *Modlitwa* (Prayer), 47.

³³ el-Maskine, *Modlitwa* (Prayer), 48.

Prayer thus becomes a school of obedience to the Holy Spirit, where one gradually learns to submit to Him, leading to obedience in all aspects of life.

Our author highlights that the presence of the Holy Spirit in prayer is linked to the virtue of obedience rather than to extraordinary forms of prayer or paramysticism³⁴, as seen in some charismatic circles. Prayer is a "school" where one learns many Christian attitudes, with obedience holding special significance: "He who has not first learned obedience to God through constant prayer cannot improvise immediate, easy, and sincere obedience in difficult circumstances."³⁵ Father Matta el-Maskine contends that obedience cultivated through prayer fosters in the soul a spirit of devotion, enabling one to entrust their entire life to God's guidance and the will of His grace. "Obedience thus becomes an integral part of a person's thoughts, feelings, and will, evident in their behaviour."³⁶ As Father Matta adds, Christ learned obedience through suffering (Heb 5:8), and "God, desiring to perfect every man in obedience, subjects him to suffering."³⁷ The association of prayer with suffering counters contemporary trends that seek well-being, the gift of tongues, rest in the Holy Spirit, etc.³⁸, in prayer. The modern approach to prayer among Christians differs significantly from earlier eras³⁹. Consequently, in the theology of spirituality, there is a growing reflection on the meaning of prayer within the context of contemporary anthropology⁴⁰.

2. Fruits of prayer

Father Matta el-Maskine enumerates several fruits of prayer, elucidating its transformative impact on the individual. He asserts that prayer molds a person into the image of God, mirroring the heart of Christ. A person who engages in prayer gains a clearer understanding of God's will and His attributes, cultivating a readiness to intercede for sinners, including one's enemies, through prayer and fasting to secure their conversion. Prayer alone fosters a love for

³⁴ Andrzej Siemieniewski, *Ochrzczeni w jednym Duchu. Perspektywy integracji mistycyzmu pentekostalnego z duchowością katolicką* (Baptized in One Spirit: Perspectives on Integrating Pentecostal Mysticism with Catholic Spirituality) (Wrocław: Papieski Wydział Teologiczny, 2002), 245–246.

³⁵ el-Maskine, *Modlitwa* (Prayer), 62–63.

³⁶ el-Maskine, *Modlitwa* (Prayer), 65.

³⁷ el-Maskine, *Modlitwa* (Prayer), 65.

³⁸ Adam Rybicki, "Modlitwa j zykami" (Praying in Tongues), in *Spiritualitas*, vol. 2: *Wyzwolenie i modlitwa* (Liberation and Prayer), ed. Jan Micyński (Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL), 213–221.

³⁹ Ignacy Bokwa, *Teologia w warunkach nowoczesności i ponowoczesności* (Theology in the Contexts of Modernity and Postmodernity) (Sandomierz: Wydawnictwo Diecezjalne, 2010), 108–109.

⁴⁰ Marek Tatar, "Współczesny człowiek modlitwy w kontekście kryzysu antropologicznego" (The Contemporary Person of Prayer in the Context of the Anthropological Crisis), *Polonia sacra* 26 (2022): 153–174.

the cross and an acceptance of it, underscoring the responsibility for the salvation of oneself and others.

Likeness to the Image of God

Father Matta el-Maskine posits that prayer restores humanity to the image and likeness of God as described in Genesis. Post-expulsion from paradise due to sin, humanity lost this divine likeness. However, God continuously guides and instructs individuals to return to this original divine plan. Prayer serves as the essential means for this return, demanding frequent engagement rather than sporadic attempts. Such consistent communion with God facilitates profound transformation, aligning with Romans 12:2's call for the renewal of the mind. In prayer, one's steadfast gaze upon Christ results in the mysterious reflection of His image within the individual. This reflection encompasses Christ's virtues, goodness, gentleness, and the light of His countenance (Psalm 4:7)⁴¹. As love for prayer deepens, one's heart increasingly mirrors Christ's heart⁴². This transformation also enables a clearer discernment of God's will⁴³, achievable only through prayer. Father Matta emphasizes that frequent and fervent prayer is a safeguard against the encroaching darkness of the world, which can lead to despair and aversion to God. He asserts that those who commit to fervent prayer attain unwavering faith, maintained through silent and secret communion with God. The enduring faith of prayerful individuals, despite life's challenges, attests to the resilience fostered through prayer⁴⁴.

Transformation of Human Desires

In prayer, individuals present their material needs, activities, duties, and worries to God, who then sanctifies and aligns them with His divine purpose:

"In prayer, we do not ask for our work and duties to yield successful results and to develop, granting us earthly fame, publicity, or temporal peace and well-being. Instead, in prayer, we ask God to purify our actions from the spirit of selfishness and self-love (...). We pray that He may inspire righteousness in our thoughts and hearts, that in our actions we may avoid resorting to cunning, deceit, dishonesty, fraud, or lies; that He may grant us spiritual

⁴¹ el-Maskine, *Modlitwa* (Prayer), 53–54.

⁴² el-Maskine, *Modlitwa* (Prayer), 68.

⁴³ el-Maskine, *Modlitwa* (Prayer), 33.

⁴⁴ el-Maskine, *Modlitwa* (Prayer), 55.

strength capable of overcoming the fear of threats and the desire to avoid dangers." Therefore, "prayer becomes an opportunity to transform the desires of the body into the desires of the soul, a way of cleansing our deeds, thoughts, and intentions from the pollution of sin."⁴⁵

It must be acknowledged that the concept of transforming human desires through prayer is surprisingly relevant in the context of contemporary mentality, which greatly reveres human desires, artificially magnified by the world of media and advertising. The modern person thus carries desires of the body inflated to unnatural proportions and feels lost, not knowing what to do with them. Transforming these desires through prayer seems to be the best help that Christian spirituality can offer in this regard.

Introduction to the contemplative dimension of faith.

The author attempts to introduce his readers to the secrets of Christian meditation and contemplation. Therefore, the fruit of prayer is no longer just the transformation of the human heart, but also 'tasting Divine delights, savoring God, delighting in Him,' and even 'uninterrupted mystical union with the Lord.' During contemplation of Christ, God grants the person 'countless eyes of cherubim, so that the knowledge of God's glory may shine upon our hearts' (cf. 2 Cor 4:4). This divine illumination kindles a fervent fire within, compelling believers to ceaselessly praise God⁴⁶. Such prayer mirrors the continuous adoration of the cherubim, perpetually declaring "Holy, Holy, Holy..." (Is 6:3; Rev 4:8). As individuals deepen their glorification of God through knowledge and love, they increasingly share in His happiness. For prayer to truly embody the savoring and knowledge of God's life, it must be intimately connected with the Word of God. The author asserts that the Word is inherently spiritual, echoing Jesus' proclamation: "The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life" (Jn 6:63)⁴⁷. Therefore, it must be inscribed in one's heart, serving as a source of delight, light, and guidance. Father Matta el-Maskine emphasizes reading Holy Scripture "with the heart, not the intellect," recognizing that God transcends human reason and cannot be constrained by intellectual comprehension⁴⁸.

Father Matta underscores that early Christians, who lacked extensive commentaries or formal creeds, anchored their faith in the living words of Christ. These words, experienced and lived out, became their rule of faith. Through such experiential engagement, early

⁴⁵ el-Maskine, *Modlitwa* (Prayer), 51–52.

⁴⁶ el-Maskine, *Modlitwa* (Prayer), 89.

⁴⁷ el-Maskine, *Komunia miłó ci* (The Communion of Love), 31.

⁴⁸ el-Maskine, *Komunia miłó ci* (The Communion of Love), 28.

Christians discovered the transformative power of Scripture, which fueled their zeal and deepened their faith in Christ. This approach reflects a monastic and Eastern Christian skepticism toward purely intellectual theology, emphasizing the necessity of personal, experiential encounters with divine truths. The author highlights that early Christians, who lacked both comprehensive commentaries on Holy Scripture and formal creeds, relied on the living Word of Christ as their primary guide in faith. For them, this Word was the definitive rule of faith, necessitating not elaborate explanations, teachings, or interpretations, but rather a lived experience of its power. Through such experiential engagement, they came to understand and elucidate the mysteries embedded within the Scriptures. This process fueled their fervor, zeal, love, and faith in Christ⁴⁹. Consequently, there emerges a notable Eastern or monastic skepticism towards speculative or purely intellectual approaches to the Word of God in prayer. Instead, the emphasis is placed on personal, experiential encounters with the divine. In this context, love is underscored as a central element in prayer. The author frequently references the passage from St. Paul's "Hymn to Love" (1 Cor 13:1): "If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal." This passage reflects the paramount importance of love in prayer. A literal translation of this passage might read: "If I speak in the tongues of men and prophets, but do not have love, I have become resounding bronze or cymbals shouting a-la-la."⁵⁰ The term "speak" is rendered in a *modus eventualis*, indicating a future possibility, suggesting that if one were to speak in tongues in the future but lacked love, they would essentially become like hard, hollow bronze—an image evoking the emptiness and potential harshness of a resounding gong or clanging cymbal. This imagery reinforces the notion that without love, even the most gifted expressions of prayer become meaningless and devoid of spiritual substance. In essence, the passage warns that without love, even sophisticated or fervent practices of prayer can become as hard and impersonal as bronze. This hardness is not merely physical but spiritual, representing a state of being that is both emotionally detached and potentially harmful. The reference to swords and cannons further underscores the destructive potential of such a hardened state, while the comparison to bells might suggest the superficial or hollow nature of prayer that lacks genuine affection and connection.

⁴⁹ el-Maskine, *Komunia miłó ci* (The Communion of Love), 37.

⁵⁰ *Grecko-polski Nowy Testament* (Greek-Polish New Testament), trans. Remigiusz Popowski and Michał Wojciechowski (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo "Vocatio", 1994), 814.

The pursuit of the salvation of every individual and the growth in responsibility for others are significant outcomes of a life of prayer.

A person deeply engaged in prayer tends to shift focus from self-concern to the welfare of others, assuming a profound sense of responsibility for their fellow human beings. Through such prayer, the individual becomes an instrument through which Christ reaches out to those who are lost and distant from Him. Prayer thus acts as a bridge, surmounting the barriers that separate us from those who live far from God. Often, these individuals may feel disheartened or ashamed to discuss their own spiritual state, but intercessory prayer can penetrate these barriers. It enables us to approach their hearts in a hidden manner, empathetically sharing in their struggles as if we ourselves were lost. Consequently, those who genuinely love and are devoted to Christ serve as His true ambassadors on earth⁵¹. The author references two scriptural passages to highlight the weighty responsibility associated with prayer for others. The first is from the Epistle of James: "Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin" (James 4:17). The second is from the First Book of Samuel: "Far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by ceasing to pray for you" (1 Sam 12:23). Father Matta el-Maskine interprets these texts with gravity, asserting that neglecting to pray for sinners imposes a serious moral burden on the individual, effectively becoming accountable for their spiritual demise. Thus, he posits that prayer is "one of the most serious duties entrusted by God to humanity⁵²," with a particular emphasis on intercessory prayer for others. According to the Coptic spiritual tradition, "the fervent prayers of others are crucial for personal spiritual renewal and the acquisition of divine energy.⁵³"

3. Prayer in an ecumenical context

According to the monastic tradition of the St. Macarius Monastery, the essence of Christian unity lies in a shared life in Christ, which is fundamentally motivated by love. In Christ, "barriers dissolve, conflicts vanish, and only Christ Himself remains, uniting all within His holy Person.⁵⁴" Consequently, the deeper our union with Christ through prayer, the more profound our connection with fellow believers in the Church becomes. This underscores the critical role of prayer and heartfelt commitment, as the author emphasizes that "The unity of

⁵¹ *Grecko-polski Nowy Testament* (Greek-Polish New Testament), 78.

⁵² *Grecko-polski Nowy Testament* (Greek-Polish New Testament), 83.

⁵³ *Grecko-polski Nowy Testament* (Greek-Polish New Testament), 80.

⁵⁴ el-Maskine, *Modlitwa, Duch wi ty i jedno chrze cijan* (Prayer, the Holy Spirit, and Christian Unity), 25.

Christians is a requisite of faith.⁵⁵ Without faith—and thus without an individual's personal commitment to God (see CCC 150)—true unity cannot be established. Faith serves as the bedrock upon which the enduring unity of the Church is constructed. A closer examination of this perspective reveals why faith is indispensable for the unity of the Church. Mature faith and the spiritual "overflow" described by the author transcend "barriers of hatred, inconsistencies of thought, divisions of the soul, deceptions of the intellect, and anxieties of the body." Such transcendence is achievable solely on a divine plane, which surpasses human capabilities and emerges as a "necessity, an inevitable and direct outcome of the unity between man and God."⁵⁶

Furthermore, the author argues that faith is essential for Christian unity because it provides a permanent foundation. Unity based merely on emotions is unstable and unreliable, serving only to glorify the individual and elevate the human ego, while relegating God to a mere "added value." To achieve true unity, one must first renounce self-centeredness before God, loving Him "with all one's heart, soul, and mind," and then extend this unifying love to others in a way that does no harm. Father Matta el-Maskine observes that while various Churches pray for unity, they simultaneously witness a decline in faith, spiritual mediocrity, and a lack of commitment among youth. He questions the rationale behind the emphasis on Church unity amid these conditions. He argues that "if there were a genuine spiritual revival and a fervent desire for faith, the unity of Christians would manifest as a collective and personal return to God, marked by an unrestrained movement of conversions, full of repentance and sorrow for sins," similar to historical periods of spiritual renewal⁵⁷.

Presently, however, he notes a disconcerting juxtaposition: a vigorous quest for unity alongside significant spiritual decline and estrangement from God. Lack of faith and the pursuit of unity are thus inherently contradictory and cannot achieve convergence. According to the author, Christian unity remains unfulfilled for two reasons. First, because individuals seek unity before fully dedicating their hearts, spirits, and minds to God, leading to a self-centered pursuit. Second, because the quest for unity is often externalized, attempting to impose it in an objective, rather than internal, manner, which leads to entanglement in external disputes and misunderstandings. The path to unity with God and with others—whether neighbors or adversaries—lies within the human heart and soul⁵⁸.

⁵⁵ el-Maskine, *Modlitwa, Duch wi ty i jedno chrze cijan* (Prayer, the Holy Spirit, and Christian Unity), 174.

⁵⁶ el-Maskine, *Modlitwa, Duch wi ty i jedno chrze cijan* (Prayer, the Holy Spirit, and Christian Unity), 174.

⁵⁷ el-Maskine, *Modlitwa, Duch wi ty i jedno chrze cijan* (Prayer, the Holy Spirit, and Christian Unity), 175.

⁵⁸ el-Maskine, *Modlitwa, Duch wi ty i jedno chrze cijan* (Prayer, the Holy Spirit, and Christian Unity), 179.

Unity begins internally and is not merely a matter of reason or cognitive processes distinguishing truth from falsehood or good from evil. Although reason plays a role in identifying and correcting errors, it is the spirit that transcends reason, capable of "forgiving, loving, and uniting." Unity is not an "object" or a scientific endeavor subject to intellectual analysis. In ecumenical dialogues, issues of compromise or deviation from traditional, ideological, canonical, or sacred principles often arise. The author asserts that when Christ is truly present, all human independence will dissolve, and Christ will become the "I of all." Thus, individuals and churches will no longer need to make concessions or compromises with one another, as everything will be offered to God. "Only the Lord can unite both parts [of humanity] and dismantle the dividing wall (cf. Eph. 2:14)." True and visible unity is realized only in God's presence, where misunderstandings dissipate and Christ's presence among a divided community fosters reconciliation⁵⁹.

As previously noted, unity is both a requirement of faith and a fruit of fervent prayer, involving a profound connection between one's heart and the heart of God. However, the author emphasizes the indispensable role of the Holy Spirit in this process. According to him, the coming of the Holy Spirit was essential for the realization of our union with the Church, which in turn signifies union with the Divine Body: "One cannot unite with the Divine Body without the participation of the Holy Spirit." It is the Spirit that integrates humanity into one Body, transcending racial and interpersonal barriers. Humanity, in this view, is envisioned as being newly created and uniformly shaped within the unity of the Mystical Body of Christ. Father Matta el-Maskine, a prominent advocate of the Holy Spirit, consistently underscores His vital role in both the Church and the individual soul. He posits that only through the Holy Spirit can a person truly unite with God and with others in prayer⁶⁰. Without the Spirit, human actions, including prayer, would inevitably face rapid obsolescence. As Father Matta asserts, "prayer acts as a force of attraction through which a person draws their brother closer through the Holy Spirit; for it is through the Spirit that Christ draws all things to Himself (cf. Jn 12:32) and transforms duality into unity in Himself (cf. Eph 2:14)." Examining the contemporary Coptic Monk's thought reveals why achieving unity among Churches is so challenging. The difficulties encountered are primarily of an internal, spiritual nature, related to the essence of prayer, rather than external structural or doctrinal issues. Father Matta believes that the path to Christian unity lies in deepening the spiritual life of the faithful,

⁵⁹ el-Maskine, *Modlitwa, Duch wi ty i jedno chrze cijan* (Prayer, the Holy Spirit, and Christian Unity), 180–181.

⁶⁰ el-Maskine, *Modlitwa, Duch wi ty i jedno chrze cijan* (Prayer, the Holy Spirit, and Christian Unity), 116.

particularly through a more profound practice of prayer within church communities. He asserts that the journey toward unity with God—and subsequently with others—necessitates a continuous conversion and transformation of the heart. Once this internal transformation occurs, unity with others will follow naturally, as God Himself will facilitate this process of reconciliation. For Father Matta, unity is a divine reality devoid of any "shadow of changeability" (James 1:17). It is God's divine strength that supports both individuals and the Church, and Christian unity must be constructed on this divine foundation, not on temporal strengths which risk fostering a sense of superiority and ultimately lead to fragmentation. Unity cannot be temporarily severed from God as a means to achieve Him; rather, "Unity will become a true reality when all are in God (cf. Eph 2:14)⁶¹."

The profound insights of Father Matta el-Maskine regarding the unity of the Church resonate with recent observations from those deeply engaged in ecumenical dialogue. It is evident why it is so difficult for churches to achieve unity, as every praying person encounters internal difficulties related to the life of prayer, rather than external, structural, or doctrinal issues. However, the author sees victory in deepening the spiritual life of the faithful, specifically in enhancing the life of prayer within church communities. As Fr. Matta asserts, the path to Christian unity leads through their hearts, not over them, such as through theological discussions. Hence, there is a need for continuous and constant conversion, a transformation of the heart, to strive for unity with God; then unity with others will no longer be a problem, because God Himself will effect the work of unity. For our Author, unity is a divine reality, which has no varying perspectives or "shadow of change" (James 1:17). It is God who gives strength to man and to the entire Church, and this divine strength must be the foundation for Christian unity, not the temporal strength, which tempts one to fall into a sense of superiority and becomes a "collection of coalitions" doomed to disintegration and decay, just like any temporal human endeavor⁶². Furthermore, unity cannot be "temporarily" separated from God to become a means of reaching Him: "Unity will become a true reality when all are in God."⁶³ The profound vision of Church unity presented by Father Matta-el-Maskine resonates with the latest observations of those deeply involved in ecumenical dialogue. They speak of "impasse," the "ice age," or even the decline of any enthusiasm in

⁶¹ el-Maskine, *Modlitwa* (Prayer), 79.

⁶² el-Maskine, *Modlitwa, Duch wi ty i jedno chrze cijan* (Prayer, the Holy Spirit, and Christian Unity), 185.

⁶³ el-Maskine, *Modlitwa, Duch wi ty i jedno chrze cijan* (Prayer, the Holy Spirit, and Christian Unity), 178–179.

ecumenical efforts⁶⁴. Against this backdrop, the reflections of the Coptic Monk gain even greater significance.

Conclusion

The Editorial Office of the Benedictine Publishing House Tyniec, in its introduction to one of Father Matta el-Maskine's works, notes that "he leads us through the entire edifice of theology."⁶⁵ This guidance reveals that theology cannot be fully explored without the dimension of prayer. In Father Matta's writings, the life of prayer is presented as both an introduction to practicing theology and a guiding principle that illuminates the mind. This study only highlights select aspects of his "theology of prayer" and does not encompass all the dimensions of his work. Nevertheless, the content discussed underscores the value of engaging with theology through prayer, embodying the notion of theology written "on one's knees." Father Matta el-Maskine can be seen as a contemporary "father of the desert," offering valuable insights into the paths of faith and spiritual wisdom. Despite his significant contributions, he remains relatively unknown in the Polish context and among Christians more broadly. Therefore, delving into his spiritual legacy is highly recommended for those seeking a deeper understanding of faith and prayer.

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⁶⁴ Maciej Kluczka, "Ekumenizm ogarnęła epoka lodowcowa" (Ecumenism Has Entered the Ice Age), accessed December 15, 2023, <https://misyjne.pl/ekumenizm-ogarnela-epoka-lodowcowa>.

⁶⁵ el-Maskine, *Komunia miłości* (The Communion of Love), 11.

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