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From a Community a Cathedral

"Then they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They had brick for stone, and they had asphalt for mortar. And they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth."

Genesis 11:3-4 NKJV

"Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: "Behold, I lay in Zion a stone for a foundation, A tried stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation; Whoever believes will not act hastily. Also I will make justice the measuring line, And righteousness the plummet; The hail will sweep away the refuge of lies, And the waters will overflow the hiding place."

Isaiah 28:16-17 NKJV

"Coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious, you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."

1 Peter 2:4-5 NKJV

Dear Christian Brethren!

We use the expression "to build" to describe great many things and activities, for both tangible and abstract meanings. Today, we are not only building actual buildings such as family houses, churches, schools, cultural centers, hospitals, theaters, hotels, and department stores, but we also use that expression - in conceptual terms - for building self-confidence, team building, community building, congregation building, career building, and image building. We might build a bridge across country borders or build a wall to keep out foreigners. Behind each of those actions is an underlying purpose. This

purpose motivates us to reach our goal and stirs us into action. As we say *There is no action without motivation*. That is so true. For every action of ours, there is an inducing force, an incitement. People have made and are making progress because of desires, dreams, plans, and goals. People have always wanted to achieve something, to reach a goal, to bring about something. Behind their efforts there has always been an underlying curiosity, a desire to see dreams come true.

In our lives, the inducing forces can be many different types of desires, needs, and wishes. We may be moved by both positive and negative desires and ambitions. A person might be ambitious in a good way: being industrious, driven, or enthusiastic, and using every honorable means to achieve a goal. However, another person might have misdirected ambitions: being pushy, aggressive, pretentious, yearning for fame and power, and wishing only to further one's selfish interests.

On the pages of the Bible we see a story that serves as an example of limitless, misdirected ambition of people. These people of the so-called second mankind, the descendants of the survivors of the flood, decided to build a town with a tower that reaches the sky. From the Bible verses it is not clear why the tower had to reach the sky. Perhaps, they wanted to enter the kingdom of God, the residence of God. Perhaps, they wanted to end the separation of the earth and the sky. Did they, perhaps, want to stretch the material world into the realm of the spiritual world? Did they, perhaps, want to replace God? Did they, perhaps, want to dethrone God? Did they, perhaps, want to become like God? We don't have the answers to those questions. We read the following interpretation in the book by Kosztolányi Dezső, titled *Chaos of Babel*):

On the land of Shinar the people began to construct the tower arrogantly thinking that once the tower reached the sky, they could comfortably stroll from one star to the other. The Lord had enough of their presumptuous deeds. He sent a fog into their minds and confused their language. They could no longer understand each other. When a mason asked for a beam, they brought him a pickax. When a bricklayer asked for tar, they brought him water. The construction quickly came to an end.

According to the story they wanted to make a name for themselves. A name that rivaled that of God. As the story goes, God found their *sky-high ambition* unacceptable and confused the language of the people. While they had spoken a single language until that time, afterward they never understood each other again.

That attempt by the people to dethrone God was unsuccessful. It is interesting and noteworthy that when human beings attempt to take God's place, the outcome is disorder. Whenever people are possessed by unrestrained ambition, lofty self-pride, selfish show-of-force, arrogance, or pompousness, sooner or later the result will be turmoil, anger, hate, discord, and dissension.

The people who rebelled against God wanted to put themselves into the position of God; they intended to arrange their lives to avoid interference by God. However, once they discounted God's existence, His authority was replaced by that of those self-adoring, self-glorifying people.

People, especially if they're well-to-do, readily become exceedingly self-confident. They put too much trust into their own power, cleverness, and financial riches, and they turn away from God. They then form a group of like-minded people and believe they can perform earth-shaking miracles that reach the sky. Jesus disapproved of such prideful, arrogant, self-important people; he didn't think they were suitable to build the kingdom of God. The story of the Tower of Babel reminds us that even in our time large projects can not be carried out without planning, unselfishness, concordance, and help from God.

The people in the story of Babel spoke the same language, but yet, they didn't understand each other. How could that be? Because they spoke the language of over-ambition, self-importance, high-mindedness, over confidence, and aggression. In their hearts, there was no love toward each other, respect for each other, support of each other, or help for each other to reach a shared goal. A true community comes about when a shared goal is unselfishly supported.

Wherever people are directed by the sacred laws of God, wherever people submit themselves to the moral commandment of love, then hearts, homes, and communities are filled with agreeableness, humbleness and good will. On the other hand, where people cast out God, along with Him they drive out and exile all the values, and virtues that form the foundation of a peaceful coexistence in society.

In addition to the Bible verse from the book of Genesis, I read a passage from the book of Isaiah: *Behold, I lay in Zion a stone for a foundation, a tried stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation; Whoever believes will not act hastily. Also I will make justice the measuring line, And righteousness the plummet.* From the Apostle Peter, I read the passage: *You also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house.*

A house has dual roles in the lives of people. One role is to provide a domicile where we feel at home in this wide world. The other is to provide a place where we feel secure, protected from dangers from the outside. "My home is my castle," we say frequently. We feel truly secure in our own home. The two functions of the house, then, are to protect us from the forces on the outside, and to give us a calming security on the inside. A house protects us from rain, snow, and freezing temperatures, and also from the sun, heatwaves, wind, and storm. While a house must provide protection and security for the inhabitants, it cannot be a bunker: a refuge where people would lock themselves in, where people would hide from each other, withdrawing into a shell.

Our house must be open to all well-intentioned fellow human beings, and we must allow fresh air and sunshine to come in through the doors and windows.

We have to design and arrange our house so we always feel comfortable, and can find rest, recharge, and gain strength to continue fighting our daily struggles.

People who do not have houses are homeless. We can inherently extend that by saying that people who do not have spiritual homes where they can go to pray time after time are spiritually homeless.

The sturdiness, safety and longevity of the house depends on the foundation, on the nature of the underpinnings. While the foundation is not a visible part of the house, it is

that very foundation that determines its strength and sturdiness. We don't see God either, still, He is the sturdy foundation of our lives.

In the older days, the most important aspect of house construction was the selection and placement of a stone called the cornerstone. That cornerstone was the first and the heaviest stone of the building, and it was laid with a ceremony. Sometimes it was called a capstone or foundation stone. The construction continued after the ceremony, and all other stones of the building had to follow the direction and planes outlined by the cornerstone. Otherwise, the stones would stick out from the plane of the wall, creating a building with crooked walls.

Jesus is such a cornerstone in the spiritual house of the Church. His life and teachings are the plumb line for his followers. As the cornerstone is to a house, Jesus is the strong foundation, the cornerstone of the spiritual house, the spiritual community, and the Church.

The building of a spiritual house, a spiritual community, requires as much conscientious and responsible work as the building of a house from stones. As the stones for the house need to be carefully selected, fitted, carved, shaped, and chiseled, so the followers of Jesus, the children of God, the spiritual living stones need to be formed, carved, shaped, and chiseled. Moreover, it is not enough place the stones on top of each other, but they have to be bound together with some kind of mortar. The only way a community can build a spiritual house is if we are able to adapt to each other, and if we have a spiritual bond between us. That spiritual bond, that spiritual mortar, spiritual tar is nothing else but the teachings of the Gospels and the love taught to us by Jesus.

We don't build only with materials around us; we also build with our character. It is more challenging to build a spiritual house with living stones, than to build a house with real stones. To form, carve, chisel, or shape a stone is much easier to do than to shape ourselves, living people. A stone, though it may be a very tough material, can still be shaped, formed, or carved as long as we have the proper tools and equipment.

What tools could we possibly use to form, and shape people's character so they can befit a spiritual building? My answer to that is using the tools of the teachings of Jesus, the love in the Gospels, and education about religious virtues.

During the course of history neither churches nor cathedrals were built in a few days, but by decades-long unwavering, unselfish work. Likewise, the construction of a spiritual community, a congregation will also need exceeding amount of patience and substantial spiritual education.

The famous French sculptor, Rodin, has a sculpture that depicts two hands clasped for prayer. The artist named his creation "The Cathedral", or basilica. When we take a closer look at the sculpture, we see that the two hands are from two different people - one is from a man, and the other is from a woman. Their clasped hands form the cathedral. An English poet by the name of Ashford even wrote a poem about the sculpture. In his poem he describes the conversation between the two hands:

Let us build a cathedral, said the first hand. Build a house for the living
God, built not by hands, but formed from hands. Let us raise our hands,

yours and mine, to praise and pray as we hunger for healing and forgiveness, for the strength and blessing from God. The other hand responded: But how could I stand before God with impure hands sullied by dust of unbelief, the soot of pride and arrogance, and lowly selfishness? While I can only come with impure hands, but they will be cleansed in prayer. I might be too weak to pray on my own, but you can pray for me, and I can pray for you. The two of us together can build our cathedral.

(Cited from J. Van Goudoever's article).

Only we, together, can form a community. True communities are where people are united through their shared goals and ideals. Our goal is to build the kingdom of God, and our shared ideals that assist in building this large cathedral are the Gospels about Jesus, the teachings of Jesus, and the moral commandment of love.

Instead of chasing our own interests and material advancement, let us strive to love each other, and to maintain the community of our own nationals. Let us strengthen in ourselves the sense and awareness that we belong to a denomination and a shared nationality. We need all of us to build this spiritual cathedral. Each and every living stone has a place, we just have to find our place.

May these ideals be strengthened by the poem titled "Psalm of Stones" written by Reményik Sándor:

"In memory of Liedemann Márton, the church-builder pastor, on the 100 year anniversary of the Kolozsvár Evangelical Church.

The sound of the organ faded and fell silent
But a new clatter rises now from the church walls.
Don't you hear it? Around us in the walls
The stones sound a beat.
Each little stone has a beat of it's own,
But yet, they beat in the same rhythm,
Beating a loud church rhythm.
God, if He wants to, can make the stones
Beat instead of hearts.

I listen with my tired head bowed,
My heart is heavy as a stone, not keeping the rhythm.
I wish my heart would stop,
And the stones of the century-old church
Would carry on the beat ...

They do keep on beatingreverberating through me,
My frozen blood is warmed and,
I begin to understand their tale:
We used to be just stones, broken, cold stones,
Hard, idled stones.
Heavy, ugly, misshaped.
Helpless, blunted, and fallen,
Immovable.

Scattered throughout the four corners of the world,
At the side of the roads, in creek beds,
In rock slides and abandoned quarries,
The sunlight crashed into our rough edges,
We scraped the velvet of the nights,
We bloodied the feet of wanderers,
We knew little about each other,
And we never dreamed about a church.

But then came a man, fragile and ill,
His soul on fire, his heart pulsing,
That man dreamed of a church.
He knew that stones were scattered about,
Helpless, idled,
Wild, ugly, and misshaped,
He journeyed to seek out the stones,
In rockslides, abandoned quarries,
At the side of the roads, in dry creek beds,
He traveled to the four corners of the world,
Where the sunlight crashed into our rough edges.
We scraped the velvet of the nights,
We bloodied his feet,
That man searched for us, and found us,
And told us: you will become a church.

You will come together to make walls,
You will reflect the spoken Word,
And reverberate the sound of the organ,
You will surround with saintly peace.
The prayers of wretched
And the soaring song of piety.
You will beat quietly in the walls,
Each little stone will beat on its own,
But yet they beat to the same rhythm,
Beating a loud church rhythm.
God, if He wants to, can make the stones
Beat instead of hearts.

That is how the church builder spoke to us.

Now, that is how the stones speak to us.”

May we receive God’s blessing to understand the words of those stones. Amen.

The author states that this sermon was inspired by the article titled “A lelki otthon építése” by J. van Goudoever in Keresztény Magvető, 1971, 1-2, 70-72.