



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States
Monthly Message for the Priests Wives
October 2020

Desolate Loneliness

My Dearest Sister in Christ,

An author once wrote, "The most basic human desire is to feel like you belong." Yet, sometimes, even in the midst of our busy lives, whether at work or at church, we feel left out and out of place as the wife of the priest.

This desolate loneliness that comes over us now and then is not unique to us. It is part of the human condition to wonder about our security in the very thing we most desire—a place to belong. Some of the men and women closest to God felt this loneliness.

I think first of Elijah, who famously says, "I alone am left a prophet of the Lord," (1 Kings 18:22). He stands alone against the prophets of Baal and the evil Ahab and his queen Jezebel. Even in victory, however, he feels this desolate loneliness. In 1 Kings 19:4, Elijah prays to God that he might die: "Now, Lord, take my life for I am no better than my fathers!" Exhausted and pursued, he has no one to turn to but God Himself. He belongs to no one but God Himself, and in turn, God takes care of him.

I think too of Moses who, in Numbers, cries out to God saying, "I am not able to bear all these people alone, because the burden is too heavy for me. If You treat me like this, please kill me here and now—if I have found favor in Your sight—and do not let me see my wretchedness" (Numbers 11:14-15). It's true what they say, "It's lonely at the top." For Moses, responsible for all these people for 40 years in the wilderness, it must have been very lonely. Even his own brother and sister, appointed to help him, were not always reliable or supportive.

And if it's lonely at the top, how much lonelier must it have been at the bottom. Joseph, the little brother, looking up to ten bigger, stronger, smarter, and more capable brothers, must have, at times, felt terribly lonely. It's not easy being the scapegoat for your brothers' own insecurities. I try to imagine what it must have been like for him that dark night in the pit. What wild thoughts must have gone through his head?

With morning came, not mercy or salvation, but a bitter journey as a slave to a foreign land. In Potiphar's house, if he gains a little belonging, he loses it all at the hands of Potiphar's wife. In jail, he gains some respect, perhaps, but sits for two years waiting for the chief butler to remember him. That is a long and lonely journey to fulfill God's will in his life.

In all that loneliness, it's easy to consider pursuing an easy fix. I think of Samson choosing Delilah over and over, although she was never a good decision, and the way this bitterly cost him his life. I think of Potiphar's wife herself, who must have felt a kind of desolate loneliness—but instead of making good choices, she destroys the life of an innocent young man. Or in the tale of Solomon's wisdom, the mother whose newborn was suffocated who seeks to make someone else's child her own, at the cost of her own humanity.

Even for us, as wives of priests, there are temptations to avoid and pitfalls to escape. The world offers us so many "solutions" to our loneliness that don't lead us to our salvation, that don't edify. What we need to do in our loneliness is to actively seek God. Abbot Tryphon, the head of a monastery in Washington State says, "For Orthodox Christians, this sense of isolation and loneliness should be a wake-up call for us to focus more on our relationship with God." It is a call to wrestle with God.

Jacob, faced with meeting his brother Esau years after betraying him, sends everyone else ahead and spends one night in desolate loneliness and fear. Instead of succumbing to his own temptations or paranoia though, he chooses to wrestle with God all night. In Genesis 32, we read that he holds Him tight, even with an injury, until he receives a blessing. Jacob in awe, renames that place and says, "For I have seen God face to face." That is what awaits us when we choose to wrestle with God rather than hide in something else.

In every situation, and especially in moments of our own desolate loneliness, we have a choice to either solve it with our own, broken way or to practice submission and trust of the One who truly knows. The resulting difference between choosing God over choosing a temporary solution is striking and absolute. We will make a new milestone in our life and in our spiritual growth. We will gain a new name, a new attribute, as a result of choosing to face God and lean into Him.

And, anyway, let's talk about this business of belonging. Fr. Thomas Hopko writes:

"The first Christian believers had no earthly identity. They were dead to this world. They belonged to God's kingdom. In their homelands they were aliens. In foreign lands they were at home. They belonged everywhere and nowhere for they were 'fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God' (Eph 2:19).

Our complex relationship with belonging is one we share with even the very first Christian believers. We are strangers in American society, strangers sometimes to our own coworkers and neighbors, not fully members of the Arab Republic of Egypt, even when we retain that citizenship.

Our citizenship is fundamentally heavenly, not earthly. We have a much greater and more encompassing identity. Fr. Hopko writes elsewhere:

"I am a Christian; I am Orthodox. I belong to the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of Christ. I am of one mind, one heart, one soul, and one body with all those who belong to Christ and the Church, whatever their nationality and political opinions."

We are at home in every church and especially in every Coptic Orthodox Church. This is our Father's house. We know them all by sights and smells and sounds. We are known, too, by our rites and rituals.

Fr. Vladimir Berzonsky shares a story about a young teenage girl who stood at the gates of a church in Cyprus and would not be allowed in. The doorkeeper assumed with her camera and American dress that she was just another tourist. "I am Orthodox," she insisted. But it wasn't until she made the sign of the cross that he allowed her to cross the threshold into the holy place. It reminds me of times we were stopped from entering Coptic monasteries until one of us showed the tattooed cross on his wrist.

See? You do belong. That feeling of loneliness is a mirage, a spiritual warfare sent to torment you. As Abbot Tryphon puts it, "Our sense of isolation and loneliness is not related to reality. For how can we be alone when we are One Body with other Christians."

In moments of loneliness, let's remember that we belong to God and to each other. Let us wrestle with God and reach out to one another.

Your sister in Christ,

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