



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

The Thorns

My Dearest Sister in Christ,

In my garden, I have a little raised bed against the side of the fence that's growing wild. Fierce weeds are quickly taking over, growing faster and stronger in these last lingering warm days. They send their prickly stalks up fast and their roots down slow, hoping to put out some leaves before winter. I should get myself over there, gloves on, and tear them out—before they're too established.

In our daily life too, my sister, there are weeds that grow and choke us. In Matthew 13, Christ tells the Parable of the Sower where the thorny ground is the third type of soil. It's the soil of us busy people, whose schedules and minds are always full—too full—of things other than God.

Christ says, *"Now he who received seed among the thorns is he who hears the word, and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and he becomes unfruitful."* (Matthew 13:22). What does that look like for us as priests' wives in the world today?

Remember that the thorny ground receives many seeds. We too have ample opportunity to hear the Word of God. We have unlimited access to all the Bible studies of our husbands and our bishops and all the sermons of the world available in a few clicks. I don't know about you, but I have at least three Bible apps on my phone, not to mention the Agpeya and physical copies of the Bible too.

We are the ground that has received bountiful seeds. But often our thorns are choking us, keeping us from really living the Word of God as He intends for our life. We're so busy running around, worrying about one thing or another or chasing one desire or another. What thorns are keeping us from living the Word of God and becoming the tools for His service that He intended?

St. Jerome teaches, as Christ Himself said, that both the cares and the pleasures of this world can act as thorns. It's dangerous to give in to constant worry and become too defeated and burdened. It's equally dangerous to give in to our lives of luxury and become too comfortable

and at ease. God calls us to trust Him in hard times and to hold on tight to Him in the times of ease.

We certainly have our hard times. I know for many of us this year has been difficult, with low points to drag us down. I'm reminded of Corrie Ten Boom's words:

"Worrying is carrying tomorrow's load with today's strength- carrying two days at once. It is moving into tomorrow ahead of time. Worrying doesn't empty tomorrow of its sorrow, it empties today of its strength."

Instead of living in the joy of the Lord, our worry chokes out the strength given to us to live today. Instead of courageously living the Word of God as it has been preached to us, we cower under our fears. How many times in scripture are we urged not to worry, not to fear? If we truly trust God, if we give in to His assurances that He cares for us, only then can we bravely live out our vocation as His children, unfettered by the thorns.

On the other hand, we must not give in to a life of comfort either. In Deuteronomy, Moses says to the children of Israel that they must beware when they reach the promised land. He warns us that when we have "houses full of all good things" and "have eaten and are full" that we should not forget the Lord our God who saves (Deut. 6:10-12). We are not called to a life free from worry only to turn and live a life free from discipline.

We don't want to be enslaved by worry—but we don't want to be enslaved by false pleasures either. Both are thorns. St. John Chrysostom asks us to find a way to keep checked the evil growth of both cares and pleasures, anxieties and riches, which threaten to choke us. Cares wear us out, he says, bringing a darkness over us, and luxury makes us soft.

Remember that the thorny ground is a fruitful soil. It's not the wayside—where men trample and birds eat. It's not the rocky ground that will require a lot of effort to break up. In my garden, I should make my own use of the rich soil that's there, instead of leaving it to the weeds to benefit. It IS rich soil, nourishing so much life. Wouldn't a crop of delicious tomatoes or blooming flowers make more sense than those useless, spiky and obnoxious weeds?

We too need to take the time to "burn up the thorns, for they choke the word" (St. John Chrysostom) to make room for the growth of much more spiritually healthy habits and virtues.

I once heard a beautiful analogy of what life is like when we don't stop and weed our thorns. Imagine you're driving your fancy race car through the countryside. It has a powerful engine and brand-new tires. You keep driving and driving, and you're running out of gas, but you're hoping you get to your destination anyway. If you would only stop and turn on your GPS, you could actually arrive at your destination—and much faster, too.

What hassle, you think, I am too worried to stop and turn on the GPS. What if I arrive late? Or what a shame to stop seeing the beautiful views for long enough to turn on the GPS? It would be a waste of this lovely day. Yet, what a difference it makes to take that time, those few extra

moments, and turn on our GPS! I don't know about you, but I can hardly get anywhere these days with some navigation app.

Taking the time to weed the thorns in our lives often seems like an added task. We try to outrun the thorns rather than turn and rip them out. But when we do, when we stop and recalibrate, balancing our lives, releasing our worries and enforcing our self-disciplines, then and only then can we make full use of the rich soil that God has given us. Then and only then can we live the life of the Word God has asked of us.

Wouldn't it make more sense to devote our energy in the right direction?

Your sister in Christ,

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