



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States
Monthly Message for the Priests Wives
March 2021

New Experiences

My Dearest Sister in Christ,

One of the difficulties of life under the COVID-19 pandemic has been the ease with which we all settled into new, safer routines. I work two jobs from the safety of my home. My children's after school activities have become simpler and fewer. We only send one person out to the grocery store, and I rarely go out to eat or grab a coffee with friends, compared to pre-COVID times. Especially in these miserable winter months, it has felt like I have spent the majority of my time within my home, even on weekends.

Now, as numbers improve and spring creeps in, we must all remember to get out of our comfort zones and try new things. There is so much value in new experiences for our spiritual life. In a recent conversation, His Grace Bishop Youssef noted that it is only when we get outside of our comfort zone that we really see the hand of God at work.

How small and cramped our comfort zone has become! To experience God in new ways, we must exit the safety of the same places, faces, and routines of our life and venture to where He calls us. When we do that, we gain new depths of wonder, new levels of gratitude, and a renewed sense of purpose.

WONDER

There is so much value to be found in taking ourselves out of our usual places and time routines. Being in a new place teaches us to wonder again at the glory of God. Standing in front of a new natural sight, like a high mountain or a vast canyon, a green plain or the deep blue ocean, we learn to see ourselves as we truly are: "*What is man that You are mindful of him, the son of man that you take care of him?*" (Hebrews 2:6).

It is not just natural wonders that show us God's hand. Even standing before history and historical wonders can renew our minds. I remember standing between the pillars at Luxor for the first time and recognizing how the creative mind of God was something He also gifted to all

of us, His creation. Though they had fewer resources and less sophisticated technology, our ancestors built incredible monuments that have withstood the ravages of time.

Browsing through exhibits at a museum gives me that same feeling of the connection of humanity to the image of God (and a great sense of His mercy despite our many weaknesses, failings, and shortcomings). In going to new places and doing new things, we "*set [our] minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth*" (Colossians 3:2).

When we see the glory of God through His creation in nature, through the work of His creation (mankind) in art and architecture in monuments and museums, it reminds us both of how small we really are and how BIG and powerful and awesome—in the literal sense of the word—our God is.

This applies to meeting new people in new circumstances, as well. In a recent servants meeting, a man described going to serve the homeless for the first time. He was in wonder at the experience, at hearing from these people who seem so helpless testify to the work of God in their lives.

Although we are looking at very real and tangible things, we know that they will all fall away (mountains will fall into the sea, the walls of the cities collapse and are in ruins, people pass away). Instead, we take these opportunities to "look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:18).

In those moments, we can sometimes feel more connected to God's glory and power than we may ever be in our own living rooms. God is everywhere and in every moment, though it may sometimes take going to new places, exploring times gone by, and meeting new people to remind us of that simple fact.

GRATITUDE

Through new experiences, we can also gain a new level of gratitude. It's incredible how even a weekend away from home makes home sweeter. We find it so easy to take what we have for granted. We forgot to notice all the little things that make our home ours. But when we are in this new environment (a friend's house, a hotel room, a different state or country), we gain a new perspective on the beauty of our own things.

Something as simple as staying in a home that is not our own shows us the level of comfort and ease we have become accustomed to. It keeps us from taking for granted our exact showerhead, our coffee machine, and our pillow. In the many blessings from God we already have, we can find great contentment.

"Now there is great gain in godliness with contentment," Saint Paul writes to Timothy, "for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have

food and clothing, with these we will be content" (1 Timothy 6:6-8). How amusing to me that he mentions for our contentment the very basics of life: food and clothes.

I think about how much I love to put on a new and shiny dress and shoes, and how, just a couple hours into wearing them, I long for my own regular, comfortable clothes back. The pair of jeans I've owned for years are more precious than the finest, silkiest dress. I think about how much I love trying new food, but none of it ever tastes as wonderful as the food I made with my own two hands. My own food never bothers me (or betrays me) in the morning.

In our new experiences, we learn to appreciate the gifts and blessings of God to us. We learn to *"give thanks to the Lord for His unfailing love and His wonderful deeds"* (Psalm 107:21). We learn to *"tell of His works with songs of joy"* (Psalm 107:22) recalling all the ways He has supported us. We gain this perspective by taking a step away from our usual lives and coming back in joy.

RENEWED PURPOSE

Finally, armed with newfound wonder and gratitude, we can return to our regular lives with a renewed sense of purpose. Abouna always notices how much our children grow after just a few days of vacation away. They seem older, more mature, and more introspective.

But this philosophy does not only apply to children. All of us are given gifts and inspirations when we travel or try something new. God can use these moments where our hearts and minds are more open to show us, through His Holy Spirit, His will for our lives.

This month, take time to try something new, something out of the routine. It can be as big as a much-needed out-of-town vacation or as small as a new route on your evening walk. It can be as big as try a new service or as simple as stopping to introduce yourself to someone new at church.

Watch as God takes this little seed of a new experience and uses it to renew your heart, mind, body, and soul.

Your sister in Christ,

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