



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

**Seven More Wicked Spirits**

My Dearest Sister in Christ,

On a recent afternoon, I drove across the biggest bridge in town. At two miles long and what feels like a mile up in the air, this bridge can be so scary that a friend visiting town asked Abouna for alternate routes to avoid it.

That day, on that bridge, we were being buffeted by the wind—me, in my little sedan, the stocky SUVs, even the massive 18-wheelers—being pushed around by gusts. And the only way to keep from being bumped out of our lane was to turn into the wind, to drive towards it. It wasn't possible to avoid the wind just by standing still. We could only actively fight it, both hands gripping the steering wheel tightly, timing our small turns into it.

It reminded me of the ladder of divine ascent, that it's not enough to stand on one rung and wait for salvation. Daily, we must climb, we must strive, we must struggle. There is no standing still, not when the ladder is at all times sinking. The floor is lava. We must keep climbing, even to stay at the same level.

Do you remember the passage in the Gospel of Saint Matthew where Christ talks about the unclean spirit going out of a man? When the unclean spirit leaves, the soul is cleansed and the heart is put in order. But it's not enough to clean the heart and put it in order. When that unclean spirit returns to find that heart just as it is, he'll come back with "seven other spirits more wicked" (Matthew 12:45) to occupy that empty space. Evil and chaos and sin are eager to fill vacuums in our life:

*"When an unclean spirit goes out of a man, he goes through dry places, seeking rest, and finds none. Then he says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' And when he comes, he finds it empty, swept, and put in order. Then he goes and takes with him seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter and dwell there; and the last state of that man is worse than the first. So, shall it also be with this wicked generation" (Matthew 12:43-45)*

I never really understood what this passage meant until recently when I thought about it in terms of spiritual habits. When we turn away from a bad habit that we have, when we stop doing it, we cannot leave that space empty. We must replace the bad habit with a good one.

If we stop committing a particular sin, we must in that same time, with those same triggers, do something positive. There's no way around it. Otherwise, seven sins, worse than the one we started with will come and eat up our time and eat up our spirit. They'll come in and keep us from achieving the spiritual growth we're so desperate for.

Our lawn has been serviced for weeds by the same company for the last seven or eight years. In this past "Covid" year, they have been slacking. Weeds are growing wild, encroaching on our resilient St. Augustine grass in a very unfortunate way. It's amazing how quickly weeds take hold when neglected — more weeds, more varieties, and stronger, too. It hasn't been enough to water and cut the grass. We must also apply weed eater and manually pull up plants that don't belong. The removal of a bad habit and the start of a good one must come hand in hand.

A friend of mine told me she recently stopped sitting around on the couch all the time and was surprised that she hadn't lost any weight. In thinking about it together we realized that just moving a bit more wasn't going to be enough to make a difference. "If you're moving more but not making sure to eat healthily," I told her, "Then your body will naturally seek an equilibrium and will prompt you for an extra few calories here and there." As our bodies seek equilibrium, so do our souls. It's not enough to stop a bad habit, we must also put a good one in its place.

During our quarantine year, we eliminated many bad habits. In my household, for example, we eat out a lot less and we work harder to not overschedule ourselves. But if we don't replace those meals out with healthy meals and we don't replace that time apart with quality time with God and each other, we end up in a worse situation than when we began. We end up with piles of sweets and junk food and hours of television and mindless scrolling.

It's not enough to stay in place. You have to buffet yourself against the wind, you have to weed the lawn, you have to put good habits in place of bad ones, to guard against the descent into evil, chaos, and sin.

Your sister in Christ,

Ni-Ni