



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

What Lies Beneath

My Dearest Sister in Christ,

As the new academic and spiritual year begins, I have been spending time thinking about the persistent and frustrating habits we fall into. There are the seemingly little troubles: the nagging, the complaining and the gossiping, and the bigger habits: overeating, slothfulness, and irritability.

What I have noticed is that many times we take these issues to be our core problem when they are only symptoms of a deeper disease. Then we treat the symptoms (or try to), thinking they are all there is, while missing the depth of the problem underneath.

Let me give you an example. Sometimes we snap at the kids and at our husband. If we treat the symptom only (tell ourselves “Don’t do that again” or worse beat ourselves up “Why did you do that again?”), we find that it isn’t long before the symptom comes up again, the problem underneath having never been addressed.

Most of the time, anything you do externally is a symptom of trouble internally. What is going on at the heart of you that you are ignoring, suppressing, or are blind to?

How can we identify the trouble beneath? How can we, with the grace of God, diagnose the issue at hand? As the Psalmist says, *“Who can understand his errors? Cleanse me from secret faults”* (Psalm 19:12). It’s certainly not an easy task, but, without this diagnosis, problems can fester.

In a marriage I know, the couple has been fighting and fighting to the point of considering divorce. Years of conflict have worn them both down. Every time they are counseled, there is a temporary peace. But the issue underneath has not been addressed. No matter how many conversations are had, if the crippling clinical depression one of them has is not corrected, there will never be true peace in the house. This is the danger of ignoring what’s underneath.

I have been shocked to discover, for example, that many issues that seem like pure personality defects are actually underlying health issues. A sudden change in mood or behavior can be caused by tumors. Irritability can be caused by vitamin deficiency.

Assuming that our inability to change our behavior, even with prayers and diligence, is simply a sign of a sinful nature means that we could miss out on a chance for God to guide us in correcting the problem.

A nagging wife must figure out if the nagging is from a deep-seated fear. A gossip must discover if loneliness and isolation are driving this behavior. A complainer must find out if the situation is really at fault or if personal insecurity is aching within.

To begin diagnosing, in the very moment of the unwanted behavior, catch yourself and ask, "What am I feeling right now?" I have been surprised to find grief or sorrow under some of my undesirable behaviors. Sometimes there is a deep, primal fear. Other times there is a heartbreak. Taking a step back and examining your body language can give you clues to your behavior. The clenched fists or the crossed arms. The scrunched face or the waving hands. What are you feeling right now?

I also find that asking myself "why" over and over yields unusual results. Why does it bother me so much that my husband bought the wrong non-dairy milk? Because it's not what I asked for. (But really, why) Because I'm worried no one will finish it. (But why?) Because that is money wasted. (But why?) Because I haven't gotten that promotion at work, and I'm worried we won't be able to make ends meet. Aha! Anger over the wrong milk is really a lack of faith that God will take care of us throughout our lives.

Now, we can address the root problem, reconnect with God's faithfulness, and trust in His mercy. The milk will find someone to drink it, the spousal relationship won't need to suffer any damage, and God absolutely will care for us, as He always does.

Another way to get a good diagnosis is to ask a trusted friend or mentor. A long-time father of confession can help you get to the root of the problem by presenting possible issues at hand. It is often hard to hear our problem from the mouths of others. Sometimes we are still in denial about the situation. But I have found that if I keep my ears long enough to hear the advice, even if I am at first in denial, eventually I will be able to make peace with the truth and work my way from there. Perhaps I don't want to hear that my pride is from a deficiency in metanoias (a physical and spiritual submission to God), but in time, as I obey, I find that my pride is put into perspective with each prostration.

Let's understand that many of our negative behaviors are coping mechanisms for something that lies beneath, something that needs to be addressed. An increase in gratitude, service of others, and addressing the faith deficiencies will often make a quicker path to eliminating the behavior than trying pure willpower.

Your sister in Christ,

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