



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

Monthly Message for the Priests Wives

May 2023

Listening

Dearest Sisters in Christ, Christ is risen! May the joy of our Lord's Resurrection continue to enlighten our minds and hearts during this Paschal season and throughout the year.

I recently encountered a quotation from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, which gave me pause and which I have explored with other clergy wives in dialogue, as it is so pertinent to our life in Christ, both on a personal level and in community. He wrote: "The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them. Just as love to God begins with listening to His Word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them," which he refers to as "the obligation of listening."

Our love for God "begins with listening to His Word," which we hear time and again through: the Scriptures; the words of the fathers and saints of the Church, which we engage through reading devotional books, sermons, retreats, lectures, podcasts, etc.; and, finally, each other as we share in fellowship, listen to one another, and discern the "Word" of God coming from the words and actions of others.

How many of us have ever considered the possibility that the beginning of love for others is "learning to listen to them"? When I ponder this principle, I begin with the image of giving birth. For those of us who are mothers, we can understand that we begin to learn to love our newborn child by "listening" to them, discerning the different cries they have when they are hungry, need a diaper change, desire to be held, or are in some sort of pain, and we respond to their needs. Sometimes the beginning of learning to love them can be difficult, especially if they cry a lot, have colic, do not seem to be "content," etc. Then we listen with delight and growing love as they begin to coo and speak their first words. As they grow, one of our important tasks as parents is learning to listen to them, whether we like what they say or not. How we "learn" to listen to them and subsequently respond become "tasks" of love and opportunities to grow in love for them, particularly when they struggle and make choices we may not approve of.

What about the members of our parish families and this principle of listening as the beginning of love? As I ponder my own life, I recognize that even though I would now consider myself an adequate listener as I have learned and grown to be more fully present to people in time of need, as I now know that a prayerful, authentic, and compassionate “hearing” of the other person is what God desires, I still struggle listening to and extending the love of God in Jesus Christ through listening with some people. I find it so much easier to listen to and respond with compassion when someone suffers because of being treated unjustly or with malice, when tragedy befalls someone, when someone is grieving a loss in life, and other circumstances – and the other person is either a stranger or I have some sort of positive relationship with that person. In such situations, I do not connect with Bonhoeffer’s language of listening being an “obligation,” as listening seems to come naturally and without a sense of obligation.

However, I find it very difficult to listen with compassion to those who:

- talk very quickly and hardly come up for breath;
- sometimes corner me at coffee hour and go on and on about their personal life or air grievances about the parish;
- blame others for their difficulties and seem to not take responsibility for themselves;
- have a strong presence and want to tell me how things are with little interest in dialogue;
- who complain, etc.

In such cases, I feel the “obligation of listening,” to which Bonhoeffer refers. But it is precisely when I allow God to work through me to listen with compassion to those for whom listening does not come easily to me, that God opens the door for me to extend His love to them.

What a blessing we are given to hear time and again the Word of God and to continuously have the opportunity to listen to Him and respond by growing in love for Christ. And then, how privileged we are as clergy wives to love our sisters and brothers in the body of Christ as we walk beside them in their joys and sorrows as compassionate listeners.

With love in our Risen Lord,

Kerry