



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States
Monthly Message for the Consecrated – December 2023

Growth in the Life of the Servant

Years may pass while we are in the service of consecration, and an important question remains that we must pay attention to its answer: Has consecration changed my life? Have I been a faithful servant to hear "Enter into the joy of your lord"? Am I a faithful and wise agent as we pray every day in the midnight prayer?

Unfortunately, few servants pay attention to the issue of growth, meaning that I may contract the disease of habituation where I lose the enthusiasm for growth. I am a consecrated servant performing the duties of my service assigned by my bishop or the priest I serve with, and my life goes on in a routine manner without growth or renewal!

For example, after several years of consecration, has anything changed? Have I acquired a new virtue? Have I gained a more loving and tender heart towards those I serve? Has my spirit become more inflamed for the service of weary souls? Or, on the contrary, I might have lost many of the virtues that I struggled for in the years before consecration. They may have been taken from me by selfishness, responsibilities, and the excuses of busyness and management, and so on!!?? These questions must occupy every faithful servant who always remembers the purpose for which he was consecrated.

“For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; ¹⁰ that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing *Him*, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; ¹¹ strengthened with all

might, according to His glorious power, for all patience and longsuffering with joy; ¹² giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light.” (Col 1: 9-12)

By the grace of God, we will cover seven areas of growth in the life of a servant in this and subsequent letter; but we will be content with two of them in this letter: spiritual growth, and personal growth through behavior modification.

1. Spiritual Growth:

Spiritual growth is your heart, your mind, and your preoccupation with our Lord and your relationship with Him, your love for our Lord and your feelings towards Him. All of this is the most important area of growth in our lives as consecrated servants. And how dangerous it is for us to neglect this growth!

This all translates into the following verse, “For this reason, we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding.” (Col 1: 9)

Depth in Prayer:

Are you still concerned with the depth of your prayers, or have they become burdensome with responsibilities and busyness in service? Have you started to spend more time in prayer? Do you feel the presence of God in your private space, or do you just settle for the public prayers in the masses or services?

One of the most dangerous things that servants, especially those consecrated, can face is the illness of "professionalizing the service", meaning that I serve without spirit, without depth in prayer, and without proclaiming the need for God's work in my life and in my service. Thus, my service turns into a social service, not a spiritual one!

“Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; ⁷ and the peace of God,

which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.” (Phil 4: 6-7)

Depth in the Gospel and Contemplation:

Do you delight in God’s Word and meditate on it? Has my relationship with the Gospel and personal fulfillment through the messages of the Spirit increased? Am I comforted by the voice of God coming to me through the Gospel? All these are signs of growth! However, if my relationship with the Gospel is just the times of preparing sermons or spiritual lessons without a personal connection, this is a sign that this growth has stopped. “The greatest hope for the greatest sinner to read the Bible, and the greatest danger for the greatest saint is to neglect reading the Bible,” said Saint Augustine.

The Constant Sense of God’s Presence:

Has my sense of God's presence increased or not? Because it is possible that we turn into "employees" who wear a uniform, or do you really feel that we are working with God, God's hand upon our hands all the time, aware that we work by Him, for Him, and with Him.

“For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, *you are* God’s building.” (1 Cor 3:9). This is the sign of my growth as a servant.

Growth in the Fruit of the Spirit:

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness.” (Gal 5:22)

Place before your eyes this list of the fruit of the Spirit and start asking: Which fruits have I acquired since the beginning of my service? Which fruits am I growing in? We must grow in the fruit of the Spirit, not being content with just the gifts of the Spirit in the service!

There is a significant difference between the gifts of the Spirit and the fruit of the Spirit. The gifts are for the service and not for the servant. Moreover, if a servant is content with gifts, they may fall easily into the traps of pride and hypocrisy in service. And they might lose their salvation because they are far from the true life in their inner person, which is not renewed by the fruit of the Spirit. God will ask about the fruit, so do not be like the fig tree with leaves but no fruit, lest we receive its punishment (Matthew 21). Let's not be like the foolish virgins who came without oil in their vessels (Matthew 25).

Growth in Purity through Repentance:

The movement of spiritual growth naturally leads to growth in purity and holiness and to the integrity of speech and action, both in private and in public. Do I see growth in purity within myself? Growth is an ascent in the spiritual level, a noticeable elevation in my life.

“Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you.” (1 Tim 4:16)

2. Personal Growth Through Behavior Modification

Service is not just words, but it is "spirit and life" (John 6:63), and the spiritual servant has the spirit that transforms into life in his disciples. They catch this life from him; they learn from his life and emulate his character, which permeates their souls, hearts, and thoughts.

The young may not understand all the words spoken by the servant. And what they understand, they often forget. But they take from him life. They learn from his way of dealing, his manner of speaking, and even from his style, his glances, his gestures, his actions. They pick up all of that. Information may be forgotten, but the way of life remains embedded in them.

The behavior of a true servant has the most significant influence on people. Therefore, the question is, does my personality grow, especially in ways that affect and are affected by my relationships with others? “That you may walk worthy of

the Lord, fully pleasing *Him*, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God” (Col 1:10).

Paying Attention to Weaknesses and Limiting Traits:

One of the signs of personal growth is my awareness of my personal weaknesses and the traits that hinder my growth and the growth of my service and working on developing them. It's good for a servant not to settle for a certain level of personal abilities and to surrender to them saying, "These are my abilities." Why not be better? For you are the image of the perfect Christ, so do not give in to acquired traits, whether from upbringing or from society or past experiences, justifying the halt of your growth!

“But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.” (2 Cor 3:18)

Struggle Against Irritability / Hastiness / Laxity / Extremism:

Struggle against all these impediments faithfully and without laxity, for each of these traits, which may be one or more present in my personality, can make me unacceptable and unloved in my service, and become a real obstacle to the growth of the service and the church! All this is because I did not confront myself with my weaknesses and therefore did not work on growing to overcome them.

Fear / Hesitation / Dependence / Negativity:

This type of weakness may disguise itself as wisdom, and for instance, hesitation may stem from fear and a sense of incapacity, not from wisdom. Again, you need a real confrontation with these weaknesses and not try to label them differently to be able to face them truly for growth.

Self-Confidence / Confidence in Others:

You may need to grow in controlling self-confidence, in an orthodox way, meaning that your self-confidence should stem from your trust in God working in you and in your service, so that it does not turn into pride. While you trust in yourself, you should be able to easily submit and apologize when necessary.

Consequently, you will be able to easily trust others. Ask yourself if you do not trust others and their abilities or not? If you can delegate in service and engage others or not? If you can develop other leaders, encouraging them to grow and expand in the service or if you fear for the service from everyone?!! All this has only one meaning, and that is that I need to control my self-confidence in an orthodox way.

Prioritization and Time Management:

Prioritization is a part of behavioral growth. Have you become capable of arranging and organizing your priorities and managing your time? This means that you are truly growing! The truth is, many of us as servants fall into the trap of disorder and inability to determine priorities with spiritual wisdom rather than in a worldly manner!

All service is a priority, but it is important to grow to discern by the guidance of the Holy Spirit without losing or hurting anyone. Also, to invest time in the best way possible, with a clear balance between aspects concerning your life as a consecrated person, including spiritual and personal growth, and the needs of the service.

In the next article, God's willing, we will continue discussing other areas of growth in the life of the consecrated.

May you stay in the peace of Christ.