



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

Monthly Message for the Monastic and Consecrated Servants

January 2014

My beloved children,

Peace and grace to you.

As we begin the first day of the new year, I would like you to think back to that first day when you began your new life; can you recall your feelings on that day - how you felt the moment when you first entered the gates? The stream of thoughts that flowed through your mind when you were dressed and given a new name? Do you recall the feeling of awe and fervent love? Feelings of devotion and unworthiness which filled your heart with a mysterious peace? An overflowing feeling of happiness and willingness to submit completely to the will of God? A boundless desire to cling solely to God? A desire to live ascetically, willingness to endure tribulation, to strive without ceasing and to live in submission and obedience serving the brethren/sisters in all humility?

The fathers tell us that a monk should frequently bring to mind these thoughts and feelings which he had when he first entered the monastery and this because, at times, we find ourselves beginning to falter and losing sight of our goal. The feeling of awe turns into indifference; love into lukewarmness; unworthiness into entitlement; asceticism into seeking the comfort of our bodies; endurance into judgment and intolerance; submission into disobedience; humility into pride and resentment. Slowly we find ourselves having changed from our desire to love and support our brethren/sisters to bickering about trifling things; we no longer deny ourselves for the greater good, but we insist on having our voices heard and our will accomplished and when this is not met we protest and react with anger and complaints; we blame ourselves for very little, if anything at all, and we set all our focus on the weaknesses of our brethren/sisters.

Gradually, without maybe even realizing, these feelings may turn into dejection and soon our prayer life begins to decline. We may begin to lack motivation in our tasks and consider giving up rather than patiently accepting the will of God - forgetting that in His great mercy, there is a purpose for all things. We may find ourselves unhappy because the sequence of events in our lives has been going opposite to how we would have wanted it to go - and as a result of all this, we may find ourselves finally avoiding the brethren/sisters and attending our blessed communal prayers and praises, not out of the will of love, but by great force.

St John Cassian says, when this malicious demon seizes our soul and darkens it completely, he prevents us from praying gladly, from reading Holy Scripture with profit and perseverance, and from being gentle and compassionate towards our brethren. He instills a hatred of every kind of work and even of the monastic profession itself. Undermining all the soul's salutary resolutions, weakening its persistence and constancy, he leaves it senseless and paralyzed, tied and bound by its despairing thoughts. [...] it suggests to the soul that we should go away from other people, since they are the cause of its agitation. It does not allow the soul to understand that its sickness does not come from without, but lies hidden within, only manifesting itself when temptations attack the soul because of our ascetic efforts.

A man can be harmed by another only through the causes of the passions which lie within himself. It is for this reason that God, the Creator of all and the Doctor of men's souls, who alone has accurate knowledge of the soul's wounds, does not tell us to forsake the company of men; He tells us to root out the causes of evil within us and to recognize that the soul's health is achieved not by a man's separating himself from his fellows, but by his living the ascetic life in the company of holy men. When we abandon our brothers for some apparently good reason, we do not eradicate the motives for dejection but merely exchange them, since the sickness which lies hidden within us will show itself again in other circumstances.

My beloved, I will that when you find yourself in a period of dryness, that you continue earnestly in prayer (Col 2:1) and cling to the hope that is in God (Jer 17:7). Forget not your first love and in times of tribulation, seek no other comfort than His; humbly make your request known in prayer and He will strengthen you in due time. Do not accept the feeling of despondency - remember St. Abracius who, when Satan tried to discourage him by telling him he had 50 more years to live, responded by saying, 'You have made me

sorrowful for I have thought that I had another hundred years to live and I have slackened in my fight and in my worship. If this is the case, I have to fight harder before I die."

Do not spend all your energy focusing on your sins or those of others but rather fill your mind with thoughts of thanksgiving and the remembrance of the goodness of God in your life. When you fall, seek God's mercy and find courage in the remembrance of this verse from the Holy Scriptures - *do not rejoice over me, my enemy; When I fall, I will arise; When I sit in darkness, The Lord will be a light to me (Mic 7:8).*

When you feel like you are faced with overwhelming difficulties, recall what you read in the book of Sirach when you took your monastic vows - *My child, when you come to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for trials (Sir 2:1)* and bear your cross with thanksgiving for *we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need (Heb 4:15-16).*

When you feel like you are being intolerant of one another, remember that, although it may be much different than your own, each one of us is fighting a difficult battle - pray to be compassionate and *bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ (Gal 6:2).* St Isaac the Syrian said that *in proportion to your humility, you are given patience in your woes; and in proportion to your consolation, your love for God increases; and in proportion to your love, your joy in the Holy Spirit is magnified.*

When you feel you might be condemning your brethren/sisters as opposed to giving them love and support, recall the words of Maximos the Confessor, *the malice of the demon of pride takes two forms. Either he persuades the monk to ascribe his achievements to himself and not to God, the Giver of all goodness and helper in every achievement; or if this fails, he suggests that he should belittle those of his brethren who are yet less perfect than himself.*

Renew your inward man, pray to God with all your heart and mind; if you have begun taking your midnight praises for granted remember that in this blessed time we are praising our Creator with the chorus of angels (St Basil the Great). We daily say in the verses of cymbals, *Hail to the Church, the house of angels* and yet sometimes our behavior and inward feelings do not reflect one who is standing in such a holy place. If you find that your mind is distracted, ask yourself if what you are concerned with truly matters more

than offering God the simplicity of your prayer.

On this new day and always, I pray for you to take heed, my beloved, lest you slowly deviate from the very purpose of your calling. Remember your first days, love one another, carry your cross and renew your covenant with God every day - *for no excellence is made perfect without toil* (*Conferences - Abbot Serenus*).

I wish you a blessed new year. May the God of peace be with you all.