



## Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

### Monthly Message for the Monastic and Consecrated Servants

February 2014

My beloved Children,

As we have just celebrated the feast of Saint Anthony the Great, I would like for us to contemplate his blessed life and consider the many virtues he achieved which made him worthy to be called The Father of all Monks. Though St. Anthony is well known for his virtue of discernment and humility, there exists yet another virtue which this great saint possessed and which I would like to make the focus of this month's letter – the virtue in question is that of longsuffering. In order to examine how we may attain this virtue, we will explore four areas in which longsuffering can be practiced in our monastic life: in times of pressure; in forgiving; in persevering in doing good; and in awaiting expected outcomes. Together we will see how longsuffering in particular, is essential in order to be able to successfully grow in our spiritual life.

We will first discuss how we can grow in the virtue of longsuffering when faced with pressure. We pose the question - how can one endure pressure for a long time without losing one's temper or entertaining negative thoughts?

As we deal with various pressures in our monastic life, some internal and some external, we can observe the reoccurring trend that most of these pressures are brought on by our expectations; we often set high standards both for ourselves and for others and because expectations create pressure and foster anxiety, we find that when we fail to reach these standards we become frustrated and lose our patience.

Saint Paul, a great model of longsuffering, said, *for I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith (Rom 12:3)*. He also said, *'We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed— always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body (2 Cor 4:8-10)*; now, how can we apply these sayings in practical terms?

Recall Saint Stephen's martyrdom and how his focus was not on the severe torture he was undergoing but rather his focus was on God; he looked not to the stones but to

heaven and saw the glory of God (Acts 7:55) and was therefore able to endure his slow death.

Thus, my beloved, in order to suffer long when hard pressed on every side, we must have respect for our limitations and our abilities and not set unrealistic standards either for ourselves or for brethren/sisters; we must strive to have patient endurance in our difficult times; and we must change our focus from the pressure to Christ, that by doing so, we may be filled with the peace which surpasses all understanding (Phil 4:7).

The second area of growth in longsuffering can be found in forgiving those who offend us and in being patient with those who hurt us. While it may be easy to forgive a stranger or someone from whom we expect negative behavior, it is not as easy to forgive a person we love – *I was wounded in the house of my beloved (Zech 13:6)*. However, if it were not a difficult thing to accomplish, we would not be given the opportunity to grow in the virtue of longsuffering.

St. Paul who traveled through three continents, made many disciples, preached for two years in Rome during his house arrest, was found standing alone at his first defense before the Emperor. How could this be? Is this not a cause for frustration? After all his service, ministry and persecution, could not a single disciple have stood with him at his first defense? I think St. Paul deserved to have at least one person go with him to his defense. How did St. Paul deal with this troubling matter? Did he fall into self-pity? No, he did not, and why not? St. Paul, who had a big heart, learned how to be patient with people and so he was able to forgive those who forsook him that day. As a result, he did not hold any grudges but rather he said in earnest prayer, *may it not be charged against them (2 Tim 4:16)*.

There is a saying that states, *when human comfort decreases, heavenly comfort increases*. Therefore, if we put our trust in God, as did the great Apostle, we will be graced with a forgiving heart that endures and suffers long, and we will learn not to hold grudges nor complain even in times of great trial.

The third area of growth in longsuffering is in persevering in doing what is good. Whether a personal effort in our spiritual struggle or an action of love towards our brethren/sisters, at times we labor only for a short time and then we lose our patience and give up. Nevertheless, I pray for us not to get discouraged but rather to learn from our Savior - our ideal example of perseverance in doing what is good.

God is extraordinarily patient and longsuffering even with sinners who reject Him – *Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me (Rev 3:20)*. God does not give us an ultimatum; He does not say, ‘I will knock at the door for three days and if no one opens, I will leave,’ no, but rather He waits patiently for us.

Imagine for a moment that our Lord Jesus Christ stands at the door of our heart our entire life – even until our very last breath – and if we open the door to Him even at the last

moment, like the thief on the cross, He will receive us. A great lesson in longsuffering, indeed!

The fourth and final area of growth in perseverance is awaiting expected outcomes - we often have little patience when our expectations for results to transpire quickly are not met. For instance, we may have only just begun our life of repentance and in scarcely a few months we expect to become like St. Anthony the Great; we can even become greatly disappointed when this does not happen.

Additionally, the expectation of specific outcomes from our brethren/sisters could also frustrate us. We sometimes feel that if we have behaved a certain way, perhaps having humbled ourselves, that our brother/sister should afterwards respond in the way we imagine that they should. However, this is an erroneous way of thinking.

Recall that our Lord Jesus Christ served his disciples for three and half years and at the time of His crucifixion all forsook Him. Perhaps if we were in the Lord's place we would have decided that after the resurrection we would choose other disciples because the ones we had proved themselves to be failures. However, the Lord did no such thing - He chose the same disciples and restored their apostleship.

Even with the struggling believer – one who falls and rises again – the Lord said, *I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; □I will guide you with My eye (Ps 32:8)*. Even if the Lord finds someone who is unfruitful, He will still say, *I will guide you with My eye*. Perhaps this person is giving up on him/herself saying, 'I am a hopeless case, there is no hope in me,' but God in His longsuffering will say, *let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and fertilize it (Luke 13:8)*. Our Lord Jesus Christ says this to us, yet we often do not have the desire to suffer for a long time, neither for the glory of His Holy name nor for one another.

Each of us should follow the example of our Master – *It is enough for a disciple that he be like his teacher, and a servant like his master (Matt 10:25)*. We must learn how to endure, how to accept to suffer for a longtime without seeking quick results, knowing that this suffering will turn into glory; knowing that suffering is the cross that the Lord refers to when he says, *“If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me (Matt 16:24)*.

Therefore my beloved, let us reflect on these four areas which will help us exercise the virtue of longsuffering in our monastic life; in dealing with pressure; in forgiving; in pursuing good work; and in expecting results. Let us accept that we will suffer in this life but with the virtue of longsuffering we will be able to live peacefully and joyfully and all our sufferings will turn into glory for the name God.

May the Holy Spirit nurture and water the seed of longsuffering in our hearts that it may flourish and become a full-grown fruit.

May the peace and love of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.