



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

Monthly Message for the Monastic and Consecrated Servants

March 2014

My beloved,

Peace and grace.

I would like to share with you something that I have been thinking about for some time now and I pray that you receive these words with peace and understanding; may they not be words written in vain which will fall on stony ground, but may they be words of benefit for each one of you, words that will fall on good ground so that you may reap fruits a hundred fold.

Thinking back, I recall my days in the monastery and the spiritual atmosphere in which I was nurtured. I remember the support that came from the love my brothers and I had for each other and from the gentleness with which we spoke to one another; I also remember how every experience in the monastery was blessed because everything we did, whether communally or independently, we did in prayer. It is such memories as these – memories of love, reverence, and devotion – which I will forever keep in my heart, and it is always my earnest desire for you to be abundantly filled with these same graces so that your prayerful lives may grow strong, rooted in the foundation of love.

For this reason, I write to you today, so that during this Holy Great Fast, we may reflect on this very important matter: guarding our mouths and tongues.

Saint Paul said, *'Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers'* (Eph. 4:29).

Undoubtedly, each one of us entered the monastic life with the intention to leave the world behind and all its carnal desires and to live by the fruits of the spirit, but to my dismay, these intentions are often forgotten and instead we willingly exchange our initial zeal for laxity. As a result of this, we become deceived in believing that it is not necessary to be so quiet and prayerful, but that joking and constant socializing are characteristics of a simple soul; this lack of discipline then leads to a level of comfort that causes us to cross boundaries in speech that we should not.

Sarcasm has somehow become acceptable amongst us and instead of speaking words of love and encouragement, we have allowed ourselves to correct and criticize each other,

and, under the guise of humor and to fulfill our selfish desires, we sometimes even make our brethren/sisters the object of ridicule.

Is it sufficient to simply read the stories of the saints and admire how they had graceful demeanors and were humble and meek in their speech? Or should we make a sincere effort to learn from them and apply their way of life? For if in the world, productivity and job satisfaction are increased when superiors and subordinates are encouraging towards one another, then should not we, who are in the house of God, be this and much more so?

Why is it that we find the same sins repeated over and over in our confession? Where is that initial zeal of ours? Why do we make so many excuses and give up so easily? Where is our willingness to resist sin unto bloodshed?

God gave us the blessing of being the first monks/nuns in this abbey/convent and has given each one of us a measure of grace – what then, prevents us from setting the proper foundation?

Saint Isaac the Syrian said, *'If you guard your tongue, my brother, God will give you the gift of compunction of heart so that you may see your soul, and thereby you will enter into spiritual joy. But if your tongue defeats you – believe me in what I say to you – you will never be able to escape from darkness. [...] If you do not have a pure heart, at least have a pure mouth.'*

Therefore, during this Holy Great Fast, let us make the decision not to let a single day go by without having said something supportive and loving to at least one brother/sister. If you agree to this, let it be done in prayer and sincerity of heart, in all seriousness and devotion.

St Marc the Ascetic said, *'How long shall we continue in this manner, our intellect reduced to futility, failing to make the spirit of the Gospel our own, not knowing what it means to live according to our conscience, making no serious effort to keep it pure? Lacking real knowledge, we still trust solely in the apparent righteousness of our outward way of life, and so lead ourselves astray.'*

And so, my beloved, let us work on guarding our mouths and being kind in our words and faithful in our prayers; let us pray with David the Psalmist, *'Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; Keep watch over the door of my lips'* (Ps. 141: 3).

I thank God for you, my beloved sons and daughters; you are my pride and joy – I have watched you grow in grace over the years and I pray for you always that God may grant you wisdom and that all your days on earth may be blessed.

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