



## Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

### Monthly Message for the Monastic and Consecrated Servants

April 2014

My beloved,

Peace and grace.

With the grace of God, I would like to share with you some thoughts on prayer, a topic often written about and much discussed, yet also one that is simple and when well understood can be a catalyst that changes our lives from one that is divided between tasks and prayer to a life of continuous prayer.

As this subject is very broad, we will focus on one small facet of it – our life of prayer and its relation to time.

“Angels are a light for monastics, and monastics are a light for the world.”<sup>1</sup>

We chose to forgo all other paths in order to live a monastic life because it offers us a greater possibility for prayer; life in the monastery, far from the world’s distractions, allows the monk/nun to play the crucial role in supporting the body of the church through the 'service' of his/her prayers. This is our chosen vocation and embodies the very reason why you are here.

Now the issue occurs when we begin to segregate prayer from the other activities in the monastery. I have noticed that we sometimes compartmentalize prayer and attribute it to only certain hours and conditions which we separate from things that we do not consider to be a part of our prayer life. For instance, we may become impatient when having to attend an impromptu gathering because we have not yet completed our spiritual canon. Or, we may serve our brethren/sisters while grumbling because we were asked to do something at a time when we would have rather be in our cells. In cases such as these, we may even lose our peace and regard the unplanned occurrences as irritating, interferences in our time management.

Indeed, it is true that prayer takes precedence in our lives, but as Saint Paul said, *‘and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am*

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<sup>1</sup> John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*

*nothing.*<sup>2</sup> Therefore, my beloved, what do you think is the problem with the aforementioned perspective?

Perhaps the issue is the possession of time - we feel as though we own every hour of the 24 of which the day consists of and so we are unwilling to 'give' any away? If herein lies the issue then let us recall that it is written, *'For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that".'*<sup>3</sup> Or, perhaps it is a lack of charity, though it is written, *'Let all that you do be done with love.'*<sup>4</sup> Or, it may be neither of these but it could be the conviction that we can only find God within the confines of our cell.

If this conviction is in fact true and our prayer life is limited in such a manner, then it only seems right that we should all forsake what we are doing and quickly run to this brother/sister's cell in which God may be found!

What I am trying to convey to you is that God is not restricted to the space and time which we assign to Him – He is eternal and omnipotent, He is always and He is everywhere. Therefore, do not put all your trust in your personal agenda but rather be malleable in the hands of the Potter and allow the Holy Spirit to lead you where it may.

Recall the story of the monks who were in a hurry to meet our Lord Jesus Christ on the mountain and all passed by an elder man who was seeking assistance in order to join them on their journey; none thought to stop and help him because they viewed him as a deterrent to achieving their goal – an interruption to their schedule – and in the end, only Saint Pishoy, who's loving heart compelled him to carry the elder on his shoulders, was blessed by our Lord Jesus Christ.

Nevertheless, let us be clear that this does not mean that we should spend time in idle talk or doing things that are neither profitable for us or for others, as it is written, *'All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify;'*<sup>5</sup> but let us also acknowledge that what is not time in our cells, a church service, or communal prayer does not necessarily equate to empty and wasted time – be conscious of the fact that we are, at all times, in the presence of God and so benefit from what comes your way in the spirit of love – *'and whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men.'*<sup>6</sup>

When praying, let us pray; when working, let us work; and when we are needed in a gathering for the good of the monastery/convent, let us be consciously present. Again, let us note that this does not mean that we cannot pray while doing simple work – on the contrary – it is a wonderful thing to have your work blessed with prayers but *'to*

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Cor 13:2

<sup>3</sup> James 4:14-15

<sup>4</sup> 1 Cor 16:14

<sup>5</sup> 1 Cor 10:23

<sup>6</sup> Col 3:23

*everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven,*<sup>7</sup> and so use your discernment – do not pray your spiritual canon when it is time to give your brother/sister your undivided attention, and do not be distracted with idle thoughts when it is time for praise and prayer.

Furthermore, the difficulty we sometimes have with our prayer life and its relation to time may also be found during prayer itself. Let me explain.

In a Christian's life and in monasticism especially, we have certain prayers and praises which we repeat daily – some even multiple times a day – and this gives us the blessed occasion for constant renewal of mind and spirit. Unfortunately, it can sometimes have the opposite effect and instead of helping us strengthen our prayer life, it weakens it by becoming something we do mechanically. Rather than focusing on every word that we use to praise and glorify God, as time progresses, we begin to rush through our prayers reciting them from memory as though it is something we simply need to finish in order to move on to the next thing on our to-do list.

We know very well that God has no need of our words – *'These people draw near to Me with their mouth and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me'*<sup>8</sup> – and so why do we mindlessly recite prayers, hurrying to complete our communal prayers so we may return to our cells or to our unfinished task?

We must note that there is stark difference between one who is praying and praising wholeheartedly, undistracted, focused not on his/her watch, and who quietly walks out of the church at the end of communal prayer, and another who is distracted by the slightest movement, who's mind is divided between the present moment and future plans, and who impatiently rushes out the church doors. The former goes from prayer to prayer while the latter only benefits from what he/she is doing if it falls within the radar of his/her goal setting, if even that.

Let us ask ourselves if we truly live in the constant presence of God. Let us examine our hearts and our minds and take note of our behavior when things do not go as we have anticipated. For instance, if Midnight Praises take a few minutes longer than usual, do we become frustrated or do we joyfully partake of the blessing considering that, in all cases, our life is one of continual prayer? How about when this occurs with liturgical services?

Likewise, in our personal and communal prayers, are we focused when we pray the Lord's Prayer, for example? Or do we repeat the words without being conscious of what we are saying? Do we really mean it when we say, 'Hallowed be Thy name,'<sup>9</sup> and 'As we forgive those who trespass against us?'<sup>10</sup> How about the Thanksgiving Prayer? Are we truly giving thanks or are we just quickly getting through the introductory prayers so we

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<sup>7</sup> Ecc 3:1

<sup>8</sup> Matt 15:8

<sup>9</sup> Matt 6:9

<sup>10</sup> Matt 6: 12

can begin the Psalms? Then how about the Psalms? Do you pray each one with the same concentration we would if our Lord Jesus Christ Himself was standing before us?

My beloved children, we must take care not to behave in a pharisaical manner and live our monastic life as though it were a series of blocks of time divided between tasks and prayer, but we should rather live in awareness of God's presence and turn everything into prayer, giving thanks to God in all things.

May we be mindful that our prayer life is an internal constant that does not depend on external circumstances and in all that we do let us joyfully remember in faith: *'commit your works to the Lord, and your thoughts will be established.'*<sup>11</sup>

Let us behave selflessly in love towards one another and let us learn to be aware of the present moment in order to fully benefit from every occasion and avoid doing things half-consciously - *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."*<sup>12</sup>

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

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<sup>11</sup> Prov 16:3

<sup>12</sup> Luke 10:27