



## Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

### Monthly Message for the Monastic and Consecrated Servants

May 2014

My beloved,

Christ is risen. Truly He is risen.

We are now a few weeks into the blessed Holy Fifty Days and I write you this letter to see how you fare since the end of the Great Fast - following a period of asceticism, contrition, and prayer, where is your spirit found amidst these virtues now?

This is a period to be marked by joyous days, which we celebrate with the Resurrected Christ; a celebration of liberty, salvation, and light, one which has no fellowship with the darkness that previously bound us to our 'old man;' therefore let us reflect on where we are in relation to the promise of the resurrection and see if our hearts and minds are set to walk as the 'new man' in the newness of life – as spiritual beings and not carnal.

As St. Paul said in the first chapter of Romans, we are all called to be saints<sup>1</sup> - to grow in the likeness of our Lord Jesus Christ – but as we have mentioned in previous letters, if we are not watchful and conscious of the grace bestowed upon us, we can easily flow through the motions of our monastic life only to find ourselves outside knocking on the Day of Judgment.

St. Anthony the Great said, 'Truly I tell you, my beloved sons, my soul is stupefied and my spirit astonished: while we are all given the freedom to do the deeds of the saints, we instead get drunk with passions like people drunk with the pleasures of wine.'<sup>2</sup> What an unfortunate truth this is, indeed!

Nothing but excuses stand between us and the perfection of the saints and because we often behave as though the day of our consecration marks the final crossing over from death to life, without great alarm, we behave in lackadaisical manner in the performance of our monastic vows. This is the danger we face if we welcome neglect and become forgetful of the very struggle that defines us as monastics.

So, we ask ourselves – how can we prevent this spiritual decline and how can we faithfully live in the hope of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ?

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 1:7

<sup>2</sup> Matthew The Poor, *The Orthodox Prayer Life*. 131.

Let us answer this question in view of our three vows and our life before and after consecration.

‘The man who gives up possessions for religious motives is great, but the man who renounces his will is holy indeed.’<sup>3</sup>

This saying can be analyzed in four parts: choosing to live spiritually; leaving behind the world and its material possessions; continuing to deny oneself once consecrated; and a higher degree of poverty which is the denial of one’s will.

We can agree that we have all made the first two choices, now how about the other two?

Concerning what is tangible, if we were to look around in our cells, would we say we had less, the same, or more things than we had with us when we first arrived to the monastery? How many of these personal effects would we say are needs and how many are superfluous? Let us take a moment and see where we, monastics who have taken the vow of poverty, actually stand in relation to the poor and then let us arise from underneath the heap of possessions to follow in the footsteps of the One who had *nowhere to lay His head*.<sup>4</sup>

Concerning renouncing our will I would like for us to examine ourselves, acknowledge and accept any weaknesses, and daily rise from every fall. Have we expressed our opinion regarding doing something in a way other than what was asked of us? Did we complain about things displeasing to us and seek the things that we prefer? Did we deny ourselves for the sake of our brother/sister’s happiness? Have we fought against the desire to defend ourselves, to demand respect, to seek glory? Let us take a moment and see where we stand in comparison to our ‘old man’ and see whether there is any real change, or if we behave exactly as we did when once entangled with the cares of the world. Let us arise, my beloved, and remember our Lord Jesus Christ who’s self-denial granted us the power of the resurrection so that we *through His poverty might become rich*.<sup>5</sup>

‘The chaste man is not someone with a body undefiled but rather a person whose members are in complete subjection to the soul.’<sup>6</sup>

The period of Great Fast is not one bereft of instruction on the true meaning of a fast; many sermons have been given regarding how to properly abstain and deny ourselves the pleasures and varieties of food during the fifty-five days. However, as you certainly know, there is a higher degree of fasting which is beyond what we eat and drink; as John Climacus states, ‘never imagine that abstinence will keep you from falling. It was a being who never ate that was nevertheless thrown out of heaven,’<sup>7</sup> and these degrees are what we refer to here, when we speak of our vow of chastity.

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<sup>3</sup> John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. 190.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 8:20

<sup>5</sup> 2 Corinthians 8:9

<sup>6</sup> Climacus 172.

<sup>7</sup> Climacus 273.

The vow of chastity is not only a calling to keep our bodies pure, but to keep our hearts, our minds, our words, and our actions pure. Our ‘old man’ may have never reasoned these things in his mind, easily giving in to such things as anger, jealousy, envy, gossip, and strife, but our new, resurrected man no longer accepts this form of conduct - ‘your tongue longs to jump into argument, but restrain it. It is a tyrant, and you must fight it daily seventy times seven;’<sup>8</sup> and so every time we fall, we quickly rise with our Lord Jesus Christ and humble ourselves for we have ‘*put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts.*’<sup>9</sup>

‘Obedience is the burial place of the will and the resurrection of lowliness.’<sup>10</sup>

When the grace of God took us from the troubles of the world, we entered the monastery as new creations willing to be placed in the furnace of purification in order to be molded into the ‘new man,’ transformed, and liberated from the bondage of sin to live as children of the Light. At our beginnings, we were zealous to obey even the harshest directions but as time progressed and personal logic began to take over, we slowly forgot our initial zeal and thought it completely natural to only ‘obey’ those whom we love and agree with it. My beloved, surely you know that in doing just this, we are not being faithful to our vow of obedience.

Our ‘old man’ stood up for his rights but our ‘new man’ has died to his carnal desires, has resurrected with our Lord Jesus Christ, and seeks not his own – ‘*Not everyone who says to Me, "Lord, Lord," shall enter into the Kingdom of Heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in Heaven.*’<sup>11</sup> Let us, therefore, arise and humble ourselves before our brethren/sisters, deny our passions, and obey the will of our Father who is in Heaven - ‘and I listen to Him, because He did not forsake me, but supported and saved me.’<sup>12</sup>

By His resurrection, we have become new creations, we no longer practice our old habits nor dwell on our previous sins, but rather, we rise with Him with the confidence that we are forgiven and victorious. So, ‘*rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away*’<sup>13</sup> and live in the joy of the resurrection that lifts us from sin to life – ‘But men fall, yet they can quickly rise again as often as this may happen to them. Devils, and devils only, never rise once they have fallen.’<sup>14</sup>

St. Anthony the Great said, ‘no generation ever lacked someone who reached this state of perfection, neither will the future generations lack them.’<sup>15</sup> Let us, therefore, renew the covenant of our monasticism every day and cease making excuses for our carnal behaviors. For every excuse that we make, there is a saint who was victorious in much more arduous conditions than this.

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<sup>8</sup> Climacus 103.

<sup>9</sup> Romans 13:14

<sup>10</sup> Climacus 92.

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 7:21

<sup>12</sup> Matthew The Poor 255.

<sup>13</sup> Songs of Solomon 2:10

<sup>14</sup> Climacus 102.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew The Poor 279.

Arise and be renewed, today we welcome monasticism as a new life with the Resurrected Christ - if we have grumbled, let us arise and deny our will; if we have judged, let us arise and be watchful of our thoughts; if we have been disobedient, let us arise and obey; let us not accept what is old but, with great vigilance, let us keep to what is new for *'cursed is he who does the work of the Lord deceitfully.'*<sup>16</sup>

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

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<sup>16</sup> Jeremiah 48:10