



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

Monthly Message for the Monastic and Consecrated Servants

July 2014

My beloved,

Peace and grace.

I would like to begin this letter by sharing with you a short story –

In Egypt, some years ago there was a young man who, due to unknown life circumstances, developed a rather unruly attitude. As his burgeoning anger began to find a dwelling place in his heart, his vices of insolence, violence, and aggression deepened until finally his ways could find him no place fit amongst civilized people; it was when he was laid off from his job that his life took a drastic turn for the worse and he made the decision to leave society all together and join a group of delinquents living in the streets. Shunned by the world, this young man learned the ways of his new trade and eventually became a leader amongst criminals.

This man, of course, is our beloved Saint Moses the Strong.

I remind you of his story because, as we all know, St. Moses' life ended quite differently than it began and I would like for us to consider the grace that led this great saint to a life of repentance and virtue and the love of his elders and brethren which helped carry him through his arduous struggle with his past. We admire these saints and glorify them daily in our praises, but I often wonder how we would behave if these very saints lived out the beginning of their spiritual struggles amongst us today. How merciful would we be towards them? How loving? How accepting?

It was years before St. Moses answered God's call to reform his ways and repent – sin had become ingrained within him; we could conclude therefore, that there must have been many times when this saint was difficult to be around and difficult to deal with. Nevertheless, it was love that changed this non-believer into a Christian; it was love that led him to monasticism; it was love that changed he who had no regard for humankind to be known for his virtues of meekness, humility, and hospitality.

It is noteworthy to mention that this love, which I refer to, is not only love which we have for one another, but also the love of God within ourselves. These are not mutually exclusive and we cannot succeed in love if we have one without the other.

Now the question is, how can we continually abound in love when we are daily met with challenges that try and draw us away from it? Although this question can be answered in a myriad of ways, let us first explore the following three.

We must, above all, daily remind ourselves that God is love¹ and that because we have desired God and nothing else and have left the world to serve only Him; our life therefore, can be defined with just this one word – this one virtue – because without it, our whole purpose is in vain. If God is present when we show love towards one another, then whom are we serving when we do not? What a tragedy it would be to say ‘*Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?*’² and hear Him reply, ‘*I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!*’³ My beloved, it is no small matter when we refuse to endure and to make the effort to love for the sake of God. It is the love of God in our hearts that gives us reason to bear the burden of others⁴ and to joyfully accept whatever comes our way, trusting in the *author and finisher of our faith.*⁵

Secondly, we must discover the root cause of our problems – if we only address the issue at hand then we are most likely only dealing with the problem on a surface level, but typically the root of the issue lies hidden somewhere deep within ourselves. Perhaps on the surface, I may be upset because I was reproached but maybe the root cause of the problem is not the reproach but my lack of humility, which prevents me from accepting blame. If I examine myself honestly, perhaps I would shift the blame from what happened *to* me, to what is happening *within* me and, by the grace of God, I can make a fruitful change by resolving to amend my ways.

When Abba Poemen was asked what it means to be angry with a brother without a cause, he said, ‘When your brother attacks you, whatever the insults are, if you get angry at him, you are getting angry without cause. Even if he were to pull out your right eye, and cut off your right hand, if you get angry at him, you are getting angry without cause. Yet, if he were to try to take you away from God, then get angry!’⁶ We see here, my beloved, that there is seldom any valid reason for discord and division amongst us; we are all here for the same purpose, so what does not deter us from our goal is meant to purify us in order to reach it.

Thirdly, if we began our day by reminding ourselves that God is love, let us end it by honestly asking ourselves what our priority was throughout the day and how well we accomplished those things which we prioritized. If after answering this question, we only

¹ 1 John 4:8

² Matt. 7:22

³ Matt. 7:23

⁴ Gal. 6:2

⁵ Heb. 12:2

⁶ Benedicta Ward, translator, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*

find a list of tasks and ascetic practices but no love; then there is a dire need to revise this list, my beloved, for it will profit us nothing.⁷

We know that there are many ways to witness for Christ – many of which are found in the life we have chosen – however, should we attain the highest levels of faith and understanding but have not love, it profits us nothing;⁸ consider the diverse group chosen by our Lord Jesus Christ to spread the good news and the incredible unity that bound them together through the Holy Spirit; had love not united them to be of one mind and one mouth⁹ would the Lord have added to the church daily those who were being saved?¹⁰ See then, my beloved, the fruits of our labor of love.

Therefore, let us begin our day by bringing to mind that where there is God, there is love and let us ask God to aid us in being faithful when we pray, *‘with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.’*¹¹ Let us also discover what is hindering us from growing in love, by discerning the root cause of our problems; and finally, let us daily examine whether our day was spent fulfilling the commandment of love or if it was driven by selfish ambition.

May God enlighten our hearts and our minds through the Holy Spirit every time we are about to break the commandment of love by our thoughts, words, or actions so that we may learn to change our ways and mend our faults. If we cannot attain perfect love, let us at least remember the words of St. Isaac the Syrian – ‘If you cannot be merciful, at least speak as though you are a sinner. If you are not a peacemaker, at least do not be a troublemaker. If you cannot be assiduous, at least in your thought be like a sluggard. If you are not victorious, do not exalt yourself over the vanquished. If you cannot close the mouth of a man who disparages his companion, at least refrain from joining him in this.’¹²

Find your strength and joy in the Lord and always remember by which virtue you are known as the disciple of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.¹³

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

⁷ 1 Cor. 13:3

⁸ 1 Cor. 13:3

⁹ Rom. 16:8

¹⁰ Acts 2:47

¹¹ Agpeya Prayers (1st Hour), see Eph 4:2-3

¹² Isaac of Nineveh, *The Ascetical Homilies*

¹³ John 13:15