



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

Monthly Message for the Monastic and Consecrated Servants

August 2014

My beloved,

Peace and grace.

I would like for you to take a moment and mentally depict the following:

Tomorrow, after Morning Prayer, you open the Synaxarium and read, “On this day, a holy father departed. He was a monk for forty years in the wilderness of Scete and devoted himself to fasting and learning the church books. He was known to be very social and outspoken and they say he was even sometimes boisterous and unrestrained. He had little tolerance for mistakes, low expectations of others, and often demanded to be respected. He did not like to be criticized and preferred to give up on whatsoever he believed provided him with no personal benefit. He was tenacious, preferring to have his way rather than support his brethren. He respected authority only when the demand coincided with his will and complained when it did not. He struggled to love the brethren and deny himself for their sakes. He did not easily forgive nor did he easily apologize. When he completed his strife, he departed to the Lord. May his prayers be with us. Amen.”

Now what would you say if I asked you to describe your feelings after reading this peculiar saint story? I would imagine that we would all experience some level of cognitive dissonance trying to piece together the missing parts in order to form a more consistent picture – the description simply does not seem to match the person being described. It seems only right that one’s values and beliefs should coincide with one’s actions and not contradict them.

Let us therefore, consider how we can avoid such a discrepancy in our monastic life. Do you recall last year’s November message when we spoke about outward appearances? Well now we will take a closer look at our way of life in order not to be deceived by them.

It is said, *‘even a child is known by his deeds, whether what he does is pure and right,’*¹ and so we are called to imitate our Lord Jesus Christ and to be persons of integrity, having such moral principles as honesty, trustworthiness, compassion, kindness, patience, and tolerance. Said morals serve in establishing the foundation of our character and help us in abiding by

¹ Prov. 20:11

our monastic ethics which, in turn, play a vital role in our spiritual growth as they not only aid us in making the appropriate decisions regarding our personal conduct but also provide us with the right perspective and manner of dealing with our brethren/sisters. Let us take another moment and explore a few.

Speaking the truth in love. *‘A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.’*² Our thoughts and words should neither be devoid of love nor should they be spoken with love but lacking honesty. For the former is a cruel action and the latter is hypocrisy.

If I would like to share with one of my brethren/sisters something that troubled me, I should not harshly admonish or blame them nor should I flatter them— when we blame, we pass judgment and only God knows the secrets of the heart³ and when we flatter we are being deceptive – but instead we should express only our true feelings and how the situation in question made *us* feel rather than delve into an elaborate analysis of the other persons’ thoughts and actions.

Extra caution should be taken when discussing a sensitive matter with our brethren/sisters for if we cannot bear one another’s burden, we must at least remember that ‘a monk is quite certain to fall into the same sins which he condemns in another with merciless and inhuman severity, for *"a stern king will fall into misfortunes,"* and *"one who stops his ears so as not to hear the weak, shall himself cry, and there shall be none to hear him."*^{4,5}

Personal care. *‘Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own?’*⁶ We should carry ourselves with modesty and self-control, acknowledging that we serve our Lord Jesus Christ with every part of who we are – both internally and externally.

I may sometimes feel that I should have complete disregard for all material things so to live a carefree life of true poverty, but it seems to me that a person living in poverty would maintain such things with care. Perhaps if we reflect on the fact that everything given to us belongs to the community, we would focus more on avoiding attachments and treat all things with its due respect; we should equally care for the garment we put on for work as the garment we put on for church, for everything has been given to us from God.

Monastic conduct. *‘If you love Me, keep My commandments.’*⁷ We thank God that the Holy Bible gives us ample, detailed instructions on how we should and should not conduct ourselves and more so for having given us the perfect example of our Lord Jesus Christ to follow and the Holy Spirit to guide us in doing so.

² Prov. 15:1

³ Psalm 44:22

⁴ Prov. 21:13; 13:17 (As cited in *Confrences*, 149.)

⁵ John Cassian, *Confrences*, 1985 (Paulist Press, 1985), 149.

⁶ 1 Cor. 6:19

⁷ John 14:15

St. Peter tells us, *'do not let your adornment be merely outward—arranging the hair, wearing gold, or putting on fine apparel— rather let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God.'*⁸ Anything contrary to this therefore has no merit before God, for to be rough, loud, and constantly jesting is behavior unbecoming of a monastic.

However, we should be cautious not to take these words and apply the behaviors mechanically while inwardly we are barren of any spiritual fruit; for what will it profit us if our righteousness does not exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees?⁹ Abba Poemen once said, 'There is one sort of person who seems to be silent, but inwardly criticizes other people. Such a person is really talking all the time.' Therefore we must be cautious, my beloved, not to deceive ourselves by directing our efforts on the goal of outward tranquility but rather, we should use these as a means for spiritual growth. If applied incorrectly, silence can be used to serve our selfish desires, whereas if it is centered on God it gives us the blessed opportunity to hear His voice and grow in His knowledge.

Nothing worth having comes easy, so we should not expect to become saints overnight but by faithful effort by conducting ourselves in the proper manner, the grace of God will strengthen us and slowly lead us to the path of salvation.

I would like to leave you with the words of our Lord Jesus Christ and God willing, we will continue with this subject in next month's letter.

*'Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on a rock: and the rain descended, the floods came and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock.'*¹⁰

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

Glory be to God forever. Amen.

⁸ 1 Peter 3:3-4

⁹ Matt. 5:20

¹⁰ Matt. 7:24-25