



## Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

### Monthly Message for the Monastic and Consecrated Servants

September 2014

Dear Beloved,

Peace and grace.

Before we continue our journey in monastic ethics, I would like for us to consider words spoken by God through the prophet Jeremiah, *‘I, the LORD, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings.’*<sup>1</sup> I share this verse so that throughout this message we can have at the foreground of our minds the truth that God does not judge by outward appearance – as we often do – and that we may receive this message with the spirit of faith, sincerity and understanding and not as a simple and shallow set of rules founded on pride rather than on love.

In this month’s letter we will expand on some topics addressed in the last letter and also discuss ethics within our worship.

**Reverence.** *‘The Fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.’*<sup>2</sup> I remember someone once telling me about their experience in a monastery in Greece and how every monk carried himself in the ‘fear of God.’ When I asked him what he meant by this, he went on to describe the manner in which the monks walked quietly, worshiped with great reverence, prostrated themselves slowly as if before a King and not just out of habit or duty, spoke very little but when they did, with gentleness and an air of seriousness and worked with meticulousness because they did so not for themselves, but for the One in who’s house they were serving. It was their internal fear of God, which manifested itself externally that this man was able to observe and experience.

“Abba Ammon said that he saw a young man who laughed, and he said to him, ‘Do not laugh, O brother, for if you do, you will drive the fear of God out of your soul.’”<sup>3</sup> Laughter is not wrong in and of itself, but think of how you would behave if you were asked to visit a king of a certain country; there would surely be a list of protocols you would have to follow and I imagine that you would conduct yourself in a solemn manner

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<sup>1</sup> Jer. 17:10

<sup>2</sup> Prov. 1:7

<sup>3</sup> *The Paradise of the Holy Fathers II*, (London: St. Shenouda Coptic Orthodox Monastery, 2008), 43.

and be keenly aware of any inappropriate behavior. If you would not stand before an earthly king at ease and laughing, then why do we allow ourselves to do so before our Heavenly King?

Always remember, my beloved, that we are in the presence of our Almighty King and always keep the fear of God in your hearts so that you do not find yourself breaching the boundaries of monasticism with such laxity that you are even unaware of doing so.

**Humility.** *‘By humility and the fear of the Lord are riches and honor and life.’*<sup>4</sup> John Cassian expounded on the fear of God by stating that it leads us to the great virtue of humility and I would like to share with you the ten points he made attesting to the actions or ethics of a humble monk – <sup>5</sup>

1. Mortifies his desires
2. Conceals no action or thought from his superior
3. Puts no trust in his own opinion, but all in the judgment of his superior, and listens eagerly and willingly to his directions
4. Maintains in everything obedience and gentleness and constant patience
5. Not only hurts nobody else, but also is not annoyed or vexed at wrongs done to himself
6. He does nothing and ventures on nothing to which he is not urged by the Common Rule or by the example of our elders
7. He is contented with the lowest possible position, and considers himself as a bad workman and unworthy in the case of everything enjoined to him
8. He does not only outwardly profess with his lips that he is inferior to all, but really believes it in the inmost thoughts of his heart
9. He governs his tongue, and is not over talkative
10. He is not easily moved or too ready to laugh

Cassian said, “the fear of the Lord is our cross<sup>6</sup>,” and one who is fastened to a cross is not only fixed in one direction but his mind is free of all earthly cares, for while he breaths his last he is focused solely on the eternal life to come. And therein lies the secret once again, my beloved – an unceasing focus on being in the presence of the One to whom we devoted our entire lives, for with this goal, by the grace of God, everything else will ensue naturally.

**Behavior in Church.** *‘Blessed is every one who fears the Lord, who walks in His ways.’*<sup>7</sup> Generations ago, silence and respect was of utmost importance in the church. There was no chatting or laughing but all entered the house of God in fear and awe - ‘all so perfectly silent that, though so large a number of the brethren is assembled together, you would not think a single person was present except the one who stands up and chants the Psalm in

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<sup>4</sup> Prov. 22:4

<sup>5</sup> Cassian, J. (1996). CASSIAN'S CONFERENCES. Retrieved August 6, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., Ch. 35

<sup>7</sup> Ps. 128:1

the midst; and especially is this the case when the prayer is offered up, for then there is no spitting, no clearing of the throat, or noise of coughing, no sleepy yawning with open mouths, and gaping, and no groans or sighs are uttered, likely to distract those standing near. No voice is heard save that of the priest concluding the prayer.’<sup>8</sup>

Silence within the church is also as important as silence after prayer. Just as it would not make sense to see a family who was mourning during funeral prayers then go outside and speak loudly with great laughter, so too it is strange to stand in reverence only outwardly but not maintain the spirit of prayer inwardly. "Abba Macarius said to the brethren when the service in the church was ended, 'Flee O brethren.'" And one of the old men said, 'Father, where can we flee further than this desert?' Then Macarius laid his hand upon his mouth, saying 'Flee in this manner.'" Immediately he went to his cell, shut the door, and sat down." Likewise, Cassian said of the monks of old, 'when the Psalms are finished, and the daily assembly, as we said above, is broken up, none of them dares to loiter ever so little or to gossip with another.'<sup>9</sup> If we continually have the Jesus Prayer on our lips; if we repeat the Trisagion, the Gloria, or the Psalms, when will there be time for idle talk and forgetfulness?

My beloved, I see the grace of God working in each one of you and I believe in your continued growth and I am confident that you do well regarding these things but I urge you to examine your mind and heart and to remember that 'In all of our deeds God looks at the intention, whether we do it for His sake, or for the sake of some other intention.'<sup>10</sup>

May God continue to empower you and bless all your endeavors that help bring you closer to Him.

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

Glory be to God forever. Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., Ch. 10

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., Ch. 15

<sup>10</sup> Saint Maximus, *Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings*, (NJ: Paulist Press, 1985).