



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

Monthly Message for the Monastic and Consecrated Servants

October 2014

Dear Beloved,

Peace and grace.

As our discussion on monastic ethics nears its end, I would like to share with you something I once read –

It was a story about a student who was eager to learn a certain skill; he went to his teacher inquiring how long it would take to master said skill if he worked hard at it. The teacher answered and said to him, ‘If you work hard at it, it will take you five years. If you work very hard, it will take you twenty years.’

It seems rather strange does it not? Intuitively, one would imagine that working hard towards something is the exact method one should use in order to master it – and actually this is generally very true. Then why is it different in this case? Perhaps it is because in this case, the student’s focus was misdirected.

Sometimes we have to fish all night without catching anything at all¹ in order to learn that the source of blessing, grace, and victory is in our Lord Jesus Christ and not in our efforts to master a virtue or to overcome a certain obstacle or sin. *“I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.”*²

As we conclude our letters on monastic ethics, let us discuss these two final points – resolving our conflicts and working together – and learn that the most fruitful way to accomplish these is not found in our own wisdom but in the wisdom and strength derived from the fountain of life.³

Conflict Resolution. *‘Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed.’*⁴ Most often, when a disagreement occurs, it is difficult for either party to take accountability for their mistakes. Usually, we find it much easier to

¹ Luke 5:5

² John 15:5

³ Ps. 36:9

⁴ Jas. 5:16

see the speck in our brother's eye than the plank in our own eye⁵ and we develop feelings of bitterness and resentment convincing ourselves that if the other party would only just change their way of doing things, all would work out more peaceably. We even go as far as to resolve that if no changes are made, the solution is to distance ourselves completely from what is challenging us rather than to reconcile.

It could be that in certain cases, the solution is indeed to take a momentary step backwards, but it is imperative to discover the intention that lies behind this action - 'Sometimes when we have been overcome by pride or impatience, and we want to improve our rough and bearish manners, we complain that we require solitude, as if we should find the virtue of patience there where nobody provokes us: and we apologize for our carelessness, and say that the reason of our disturbance does not spring from our own impatience, but from the fault of our brethren. And while we lay the blame of our fault on others, we shall never be able to reach the goal of patience and perfection.'⁶

As our beloved Saint Paul the Anchorite once said, 'He who flees from tribulation, flees from God' and so, if we refuse to look within to the source of the problem and distance ourselves from it instead – out of the great compassion and love of our Lord – we will surely continue to encounter the issue in various forms until we have gained the virtue intended for us.

We know that common, carnal reactions to conflict include anger and defense but that our calling is to '*be tenderhearted, be courteous; not returning evil for evil or reviling for reviling,*'⁷ and so we must strive to control our initial reactions and allow ourselves time for prayer in order to seek counsel from God and strength in time of weakness. By doing so, we quiet the storm and slowly learn, through the power of prayer, that what seems unfathomable to do is never impossible with God. "And so a monk aiming at perfection, and desiring to strive lawfully in his spiritual combat, should be free from all sin of anger and wrath, [...] For he who wants to heal another's wound ought to be in good health and free from every affection of weakness himself, lest that saying of the gospel should be used to him, '*Physician, first heal thyself,*'"⁸

In the world maybe we allowed ourselves to hold grudges and to burn bridges but living in a closed community provides us with the opportunity to quickly follow God's instructions not to '*let the sun go down on our wrath*'⁹ and so we should follow the example of the saints and make haste to reconcile with our brother/sister. 'How then may we retain displeasure against our brother, I will not say for several days, but even till the going down of the sun, if we are not allowed to offer our prayers to God while he has

⁵ Matt. 7:3

⁶ Cassian, J. (1894). How calm a monk ought to be. In *HOW USELESS IS THE RETIREMENT OF THOSE WHO DO NOT GIVE UP THEIR BAD MANNERS*. New York: Lectio Divina.

⁷ 1 Pet. 3:9

⁸ Cassian, J. (1894). How calm a monk ought to be. In *THE TWELVE BOOKS OF JOHN CASSIAN ON THE INSTITUTES OF THE COENOBIA, AND THE REMEDIES FOR THE EIGHT PRINCIPAL FAULTS*. New York: Lectio Divina.

⁹ Eph. 4:26

anything against us? And yet we are commanded by the Apostle: ‘*Pray without ceasing;*’ and ‘*in every place lifting up holy hands without wrath and disputing.*’ It remains then either that we never pray at all, retaining this poison in our hearts, and become guilty in regard of this apostolic or evangelic charge, in which we are bidden to pray everywhere and without ceasing; or else if, deceiving ourselves, we venture to pour forth our prayers, contrary to His command, we must know that we are offering to God no prayer, but an obstinate temper with a rebellious spirit.¹⁰

My beloved, we forsook the world – we left our families, our positions, and our belongings in order to carry our cross for our love of God; moved by the lives of the monastics before us who perfected the virtues of humility and love, we desired to follow in their footsteps. We entered the monastery desiring to pray, to serve our brethren, and to allow God to purify us in whatever way He sees fit. We did not, however, enter so we can be in a worse state than when we came in - bickering over trifling things and holding on tightly to our ego.

We must try and always remember why we are here and have faith that a blessing lies behind every struggle. St. Mark the Ascetic said, ‘If someone puts his trust in God in a matter, let him not argue with his brother about it.’¹¹

My beloved, may we let go of our pride and hold on to our peace; may we let God be the guide in our lives and put all our trust in Him.

God willing, we will discuss working together in next month’s letter and this will conclude our discussion on monastic ethics.

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

Glory be to God forever. Amen.

¹⁰ Cassian, J. (1894). How calm a monk ought to be. In *THAT WE SHOULD NOT RETAIN OUR ANGER EVEN FOR AN INSTANCE*. New York: Lectio Divina.

¹¹ Nicodemus, t. H., Makarios, S., Palmer, G. E. H. 1., Sherrard, P., & Ware, K. (1979). *The Philokalia: The complete text*. London ; Boston: Faber and Faber.