



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

Monthly Message for the Monastic and Consecrated Servants

November 2014

Dear Beloved,

Peace and grace.

This month's letter was meant to be on work ethics within the monastery, however we will pause for a moment to discuss other topics and then, God willing, we will conclude the series on monastic ethics in the upcoming letters.

We know that in all matters of life, it is always wise to maintain a healthy balance – not leaning towards any extremes in order to allow ourselves to keep a certain flexibility, which helps in adapting to change. This balance is especially important in monasticism because as monastics, we live by many rules and, if we are not careful, these rules can easily control us rather than act as a support in our spiritual growth.

The benefit of having rules is that it keeps us structured and united, but a thin line exists between that and the rigidity and narrowing of the mind that rules can create within us. Remember the great Apostle, Saint Paul, and how perfectly he observed the Mosaic Law; but also recall that after his conversion, St. Paul, a Pharisee who '*concerning the righteousness which is in the law,*'¹ was blameless, later preached liberty from the law in love through Christ Jesus.² What a great loss the world would have suffered had St. Paul hardened his heart and not allowed God to be the guide of his actions.

We are the cross-bearers, called to deny ourselves and carry our cross daily;³ our actions are meant to be a light that shines before men for the glory of God;⁴ we are called to a life of asceticism, prayer, and contemplation, but above all, we are called to live a life of mercy and love. Our Lord Jesus Christ said, '*learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart,*'⁵ and so as we follow our Master, we must remember that we are not marching behind an army general who calls out orders, but we are following the very essence of love, whose every action was an example of grace, forgiveness, and compassion.

There should be no misunderstanding – we must indeed be faithful to our monastic cannons and live by the ethics of monasticism, but we must not forget that rules are not

¹ Phil. 3:6

² Gal. 5:6

³ Luke 9:23

⁴ Matt 5:16

⁵ Matt 11:29

what define us as monastics and a balance should be maintained so not to break the greatest commandment of all.⁶

Recall the many stories of our desert fathers who, being obedient to the Holy Spirit, saw beyond the boundaries of rules and acted in love – St. Moses who broke the fast and served his guests, St. Macarius who covered the sin of the monk who had committed adultery, St. Poemen who gave advice concerning a monk who would sleep during communal prayer – although exceptions were made, no one could ever say that these saints were any less monastic because of their choices.

In our sublime and blessed life, we are daily given the opportunity to make a choice – how do I choose to handle this situation? How can I keep the balance between my monastic rule and the law of love? “They used to say that Abba Sisoës the Theban wanted to dwell among the reeds of Arsania, where there was, at some distance from him, an old man who was sick. When he heard [of it] he was distressed, for he fasted two days at a time, and that day was the day on which he ought not to eat. He said in his mind, ‘What shall I do? For perhaps the brethren will compel me to eat, and if I wait [to go to the old man] until tomorrow perhaps he will be dead. I can do only this. I will go, but I will not break the law and eat.’ So he went, and did not eat. Thus he did not break the rule of life [he observed] for God’s sake.”⁷

If all we do, we do for the glory of God⁸ then before you make a choice, ask yourself, ‘will this choice glorify God? Am I doing this for my sake or for His?’ ‘*We know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies.*’⁹ It was said that, ‘the blessed Anthony never deemed it right to do whatever was convenient for himself to the same extent as doing whatever was profitable for his neighbor’.¹⁰ Likewise, when a brother went to visit a certain monk, “he said to him, ‘Forgive me, O father, for having made you to desist from your rule’; and the monk said to him, ‘My rule is to refresh you, and to send you away in peace.’”¹¹

Remember, my beloved, that ‘*the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath,*’¹² and so let us pray and ask God to grant us the wisdom and discernment in order to maintain the proper balance so not to shut a door that was perhaps, meant to be opened to us.

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

Glory be to God forever. Amen.

⁶ Matt. 22:36-40

⁷ Budge, E., & Putty, N. (2008). Questions & Answers on the Ascetic Rule. In *The Paradise of the Holy Fathers* (Rev. ed., Vol. 2nd, p. 258). Putty, N.S.W.: St Shenouda Coptic Orthodox Monastery.

⁸ 1 Cor. 10:31

⁹ 1 Cor. 8:1

¹⁰ Budge, E., & Putty, N. (2008). On Love and Charity and the Welcoming of the Stranger. In *The Paradise of the Holy Fathers* (Rev. ed., Vol. 2nd, p. 107). Putty, N.S.W.: St Shenouda Coptic Orthodox Monastery.

¹¹ Budge, E., & Putty, N. (2008). On Love and Charity and the Welcoming of the Stranger. In *The Paradise of the Holy Fathers* (Rev. ed., Vol. 2nd, p. 117). Putty, N.S.W.: St Shenouda Coptic Orthodox Monastery.

¹² Mark 2:27