



## Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

### Monthly Message for the Monastic and Consecrated Servants

December 2014

Dear beloved,

Peace and grace.

I write to you this month's letter with joy in my heart. A rejoicing in the Lord for His great love and His many graces, which continually supports us. What good could we accomplish if it were not for He who upholds us with His righteous right hand?<sup>1</sup> Though we should not forget that there will still be times when we fall and find ourselves suffering from those temptations which our Desert Fathers spoke about – gluttony, lust, avarice, sadness, anger, acedia, vainglory, and pride – I, nevertheless, rejoice in seeing God's grace working in unique ways in every one of you.

Today's Gospel reading brought to mind some of these obstacles which hinder our growth – boulders we place on our path, which obstruct or at least delay our spiritual progress – and I would like to discuss with you how we can recognize them in our life and rise above them by the grace of God.<sup>2</sup> From the Gospel of Mark chapter 10, we read: *"Then Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, 'One thing you lack: Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow Me.' But he was sad at this word, and went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions."*<sup>3</sup>

Let us start from the very beginning – from the moment when we knew with absolute certainty that we could no longer bear the troubles of the world; the day when we knew that to find our life, we would have to lose it;<sup>4</sup> when we understood that we would first have to die, in order to truly live. It was on that day that our Lord Jesus Christ looked at us, loved us, and called us, and we, in turn, gave up all that we had, took up our cross, and followed Him.

Years later, we can look back and enumerate many possessions, which we relinquished before entering the monastery but I also think that in this present moment, we can look within and enumerate many riches which we still hold on to very strongly. The question is – what are the true possessions we were called to give up in order to take up our cross and follow Him?

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<sup>1</sup> Isa. 41:10

<sup>2</sup> 1 Cor. 10:13

<sup>3</sup> Mark 10:21

<sup>4</sup> Matt. 16:25

The answer to this question will vary from monk to monk as our internal battle is unique only to us, however, what we do share in common is the challenging process of separation from those things which we have grown to treasure. To one monk, the battle may be complete submission against all personal logic, to another it may be victory over gluttony and anger, and yet to another it may be obedience and humility in times of trial, but in all cases our ultimate calling is to deny whatever desire lurks within us until, little by little, we die to every passion that hampers our growth.

Could you imagine how difficult it would be to walk a narrow and rocky path, uphill, while carrying a large, wooden cross as well as countless possessions? Would not the letting go of even a single possession alleviate the struggle and lighten the burden?<sup>5</sup> However, these are not just simple belongings, which are easily done away with, but they are our hidden weaknesses, which are deep rooted in our carnal beings – it is only through painful death of our will that we can be separated from them.

We can suffer two kinds of death: the end of life which will come upon each one of us at a time when we do not expect,<sup>6</sup> or a voluntary one by which we can ask for God's mercy in helping us overcome our sin so that we may die to the flesh and live according to the spirit.<sup>7</sup> Though we stumble and may even experience great falls, we must never accept to continue carrying the heavy burden of riches which were acquired with pride and self-will because when our path becomes narrow we will have to make a choice: we will have to choose to either let go of what we are holding to and pass through the gate, or hold on to our sin and go away sorrowful as did the rich young ruler. This narrow path is not a milestone, but it is everytime we are called to humble ourselves and deny our will.

My beloved, no matter how hard it is or how shameful we may feel, it is important to recognize those things which are holding us back from growing spiritually and lay them at the gate before God. St. Neilos the Ascetic tells us, "The apostles received this way of life from Christ and made it their own, renouncing the world in response to His call, disregarding fatherland, relatives and possessions. At once they adopted a harsh and strenuous way of life, facing every kind of adversity, afflicted, tormented, harassed, naked, lacking even necessities; and finally they met death boldly, imitating their Teacher faithfully in all things. Thus through their actions they left behind a true image of the highest way of life. Although all Christians should have modeled their own life on this image, most of them either lacked the will to do so or else made only feeble efforts. There were, however, a few who had the strength to rise above the turmoil of the world and to flee from the agitation of cities. Having escaped from this turbulence, they embraced the monastic life and reproduced in themselves the pattern of apostolic virtue." "In short, they were lights shining in darkness; they were fixed stars illuminating the jet-black night of life; they were harbor walls unshaken by storms. They showed everyone how simple it is to escape unharmed from the provocations of the passions.

But this strict and angelic way of life has suffered the fate of a portrait many times recopied by careless hands, until gradually all likeness to the original has been lost. Though we are crucified to the world, though we have renounced this transitory life and

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<sup>5</sup> Matt. 11:30

<sup>6</sup> Matt. 24:44

<sup>7</sup> Rom. 8:13

our purely human limitations, aspiring to the state of the angels by sharing their dispassion, yet we have relapsed and fallen back. Because of our material concerns and shameful acquisitiveness, we have blunted the edge of true asceticism; and by our negligence we discredit even those who through their genuine sanctity truly deserve to be honored. Wearing the monastic habit, we have 'put our hand to the plough', yet we look back, forgetting and even strongly rejecting our duties, and so do not become 'fit for the kingdom of heaven' (cf. Luke 9:62)."<sup>8</sup>

Be strong, my beloved and learn humility through patient perseverance because just as death will lead us to life, our journey up the mountain will strengthen us rather than make us weary; for everything, which we give up in Christ, we gain in return a hundred fold.<sup>9</sup> Do not go through your monastic life unwilling to allow God to change you, for God fashioned your cross and He has a specific plan designed to help you carry it until the end.

You are always in my prayers and may God continue to bless you and strengthen you on your path.

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> St Nilos The Ascetic Discourse. (1979). In *The Philokalia: The complete text* (p. 142). London: Faber and Faber.

<sup>9</sup> Mark 10:30