



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

Monthly Message for the Monastic and Consecrated Servants

February 2015

My beloved Children,

Have you heard of that story of the artist who wanted to paint a portrait of our Lord Jesus Christ and found a man of beautiful and peaceful countenance to use as a model for his work? Do you recall it being said that when he later wanted to paint Judas and searched for a model with strong and dark features, that he found the very same man he had used as a model for our Lord Jesus Christ some years before?

Whether this story actually happened or not is of little importance, but it is a nice reminder that our delicate human nature is very much susceptible to change, and for the worse if we are not watchful. This I mention to you because I want us, during this time of spiritual renewal, to begin walking the journey back to our first Love. I would like each one of us to remember that pearl of great price, which we sold everything to obtain¹ and to journey back to God. I would like for us not to do things out of habit or out of routine, nor do things for our own will, but to do all things only for the love of Him who first loved us² and for Him only.

Sometimes when life takes us on an unexpected turn we find ourselves lost and struggling to return to the narrow path we first began walking on. We may find ourselves on a new path, which seems familiar and is perhaps parallel for some time to the original path, but it ends up leading to an entirely different direction.

What is that narrow path that I first walked on and how did I first find it? It is a path paved with prayer and worship, trials and self-denial, suffering and asceticism, but still many paths alongside it seem alike to it; how therefore, will I differentiate this path from all others that may have similar paving? Perhaps I am praying constantly but not realizing that the path I am walking is beginning to divert drastically to the right or maybe I am beginning to keep a healthy distance between myself and those I do not know how to interact with and not realizing that the path I am walking is beginning to divert slightly to the left. So, how do I know the difference?

The difference is found in those who walked the path before us. In this case, there is ever only one true path and the Way was paved by His footsteps – *“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”*³ Our Lord Jesus Christ imprinted His footsteps along

¹ Matt. 13:45-46

² 1 John 4:19

³ John 3:16

the entire path so that we can be sure to never falter and to always find courage and strength even when the path darkens or tightens – *“For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.”*⁴

The first monastics were those who witnessed the faith and struggle of the martyrs and ran the race, behind these faithful, with great love enflaming their hearts and empowering them along the way. Many before us faithfully followed the footsteps of our Lord Jesus Christ with great zeal and devotion and these have left behind enumerable words of wisdom from their experience to guide and encourage those who would follow after them on the Way. The narrow path, we walk today, has been walked on by saints who died to keep our faith; we daily stand and glorify God in a language which these saints suffered to protect and preserve, and we are called monastics today because of the life of monasticism which they began generations before our time.

My beloved children remember your first Love just as these saints never forgot Him, and as you walk the narrow path every day, always have before your eyes He who walked before you. Have before your eyes He who was flogged for you; He who was stricken and spat on for you; He who carried the cross for you; He who gave His life for you. Let us not become distracted with those deceiving things which reroute us from our calling.

During this Holy Great Fast remember He who first fasted for you. When you feel unwilling to leave your cell and serve your brethren/sisters, remember He who came not *“to be served, but to serve”*.⁵ When you feel unable to apologize, remember He who humbled Himself for you. When you feel unable to forgive from your heart, remember He who forgave you from His. When you feel mistreated, remember he who answered not a word.⁶ When you feel overwhelmed, remember He who walked before You and said, *“In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”*⁷ and promised, *“I will never leave you nor forsake you.”*⁸

When you feel weakened in your struggle, remember the martyrs who ran the race before you.

Let us examine ourselves daily and see whether we have been diverted from the glorious path which we are unworthy to walk. Let us examine ourselves not by what is seen on the outside, but our interior life which is seen only by God, and remove from within any negligence or laziness, any spot or blemish that might distract us from seeking the Kingdom of God.

May God fill us with His love and may the Holy Spirit enlighten us to be every so watchful of every word we utter and every action we take.

May the peace and love of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Glory be to God forever. Amen.

⁴ Heb 4:15

⁵ Matt. 20:28

⁶ Matt. 27:14

⁷ John 16:33

⁸ Heb 13:5