



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

Monthly Message for the Monastic and Consecrated Servants

March 2015

My Beloved,

Peace and grace.

A few weeks ago we discussed what the Lord said to the prophet Joel, “*Consecrate a fast, call a sacred assembly*”¹ and we spoke of dedicating this blessed time solely to our Lord Jesus Christ in abstinence, prayer and meditation. Now I would like each one of you to ask yourself honestly if this Holy Great Fast has been a time of spiritual growth and a scared time dedicated to God – have you truly benefited from the abstinence of the desires of the flesh and grown closer to God in spirit – or, so far, has it been merely an outwardly act based on formalities without any real internal growth?

If, to the first question, you have answered yes, then you have done well and may God continue to strengthen you. However, if you have answered no, then I would like you to ask yourself two more questions: what is your goal when fasting and what means do you use to attain it?

Is your goal simply to follow instructions by abiding by the rules of the monastery and the traditions of the church or do you fast because you love God and your goal is to grow greater in His love? Do you abstain from food for hours because you were told to do so, or is it because there is no better time to pray to our Beloved then when, through hunger, your body is humbled before its Master?

Keeping our eye on the goal is imperative. If we begin fasting with a false goal, we may soon fall into the sin of pride or dispassion. The former because we make the means our actual goal and begin to see ourselves as more ascetic than our spiritual elders and the monastic community, and the latter because our fasting is done simply out of routine and not out of love. Let us, therefore, make it a point in our monastic life not to do anything mindlessly, without any aim or understanding, for by doing this we weaken ourselves against the wiles of the devil.

¹ Joel 1:14

It is likewise of equal importance to examine the means we use to attain our goal for these will either aid us or distract us. Therefore we must ask ourselves: what are the appropriate means we must undertake in order to spiritually benefit from our fasts? To provide a comprehensive answer to this question would require filling many pages of this letter, so let us focus on the first point and perhaps we can visit this topic again at a later time.

We must foremost practice self-control. Even during the Holy Great Fast, we often seek what is comfortable or suitable to us and we casually make excuses for our lax behavior and criticize others for their austerity, claiming that God looks only to the heart and is not concerned by the details of our sacrifice.

Although, this claim is not false, a deception lies therein for it has been said that it is impossible for one who is lenient and indulgent in his or her way of life to practice perfect purity. John Climacus tells us to “begrudge the stomach and your heart will be humbled; please the stomach and your mind will turn proud. ... If you begrudge the stomach, your mouth will stay closed, because the tongue flourishes where food is abundant. Fight as hard as you can against the stomach and let your vigilance hold it in. Make the effort, however little, and the Lord will quickly come to help you.”² Thus, appropriate means are necessary to attain a goal.

Fasting is an abstinence from the desires of the flesh and the church helps us in accomplishing this by giving us food items to exclude from our diet. However, changing our cooking ingredients is most definitely not the definition of a true fast. Then what is? Climacus goes on to say, “If you have promised Christ to travel the straight and narrow road, then keep your stomach in check; for if you give in to it, if you enlarge it, you are breaking your promise,”³ for “the body prospers in the measure in which the soul is wakened, and the soul prospers in the measure in which the body is weakened.”⁴

However, controlling our stomach is not the only means but rather it can be said to be the first means, which opens a gateway to practicing other virtues. A monk who controls his stomach is also disciplined when faced with other struggles. When we give in to our cravings and rush to fill our stomachs as soon as the clock ticks a moment past the hour to break the fast, or when we fill our bellies with savory food, we are not practicing abstinence but rather delaying gluttony. If, by the grace of God, we make an effort to deny ourselves the desires of our palate, we can, by the grace of God, begin to shut the door to Gluttony’s claimed offspring – ‘My firstborn son is the servant of Fornication, the second is Hardness of Heart, and the third is Sleepiness. ... My daughters are Laziness, Talkativeness, Breezy Familiarity, Jestings, Facetiousness, Contradiction, Stubbornness, Contempt, Disobedience, Stolidity of Mind, Captivity, Boastfulness, Audacity, Love of Worldly Things, followed by Impure Prayer, Distracted Thoughts, and sudden and often

² Climacus, J. (1982). On Gluttony. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 168). New York: Paulist Press.

³ Climacus, J. (1982). On Gluttony. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 169). New York: Paulist Press.

⁴ Ward, B. (1975). Daniel. In *The Sayings of the Fathers* (p.52). Michigan: Cisterian Publications.

unexpected Catastrophes, with which is linked the most evil of all my daughters, namely, Despair.”⁵ Thus, self-control is vital to our growth.

I would like to continue and write to you about many things, but for now allow me to leave you with words from Climacus who said, “and never imagine that abstinence will keep you from falling. It was a being who never ate that was nevertheless thrown out of heaven.”⁶ If we continually bring to mind that we are fasting out of love of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who fulfilled all righteousness in order to leave us a perfect example of the path on which we should walk, we will not be preoccupied with food, rather our nourishment will come from the word of God⁷ and our humble prayers, and all other means will come naturally to us⁸.

My beloved, we must be careful to examine our heart before we begin a period of fasting and prepare it for a sacred time of prayer. Let us pray for God to enlighten our minds to understand the true meaning of the fast so that we do nothing carelessly but that we may truly partake of its blessing and grow in His love. A true fast is not merely an exchange of foods in our refrigerator but a lasting exchange of vice for virtue.

I recommend reading *The Spirituality of Fasting* by His Holiness Pope Shenouda III, which will give you great insight on the meaning of a fast and the virtues that accompany it.

Let us continue the remaining days with the right goal always before us and let us end the Holy Great Fast filled with all its blessings.

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

Glory be to God forever. Amen.

⁵ Climacus, J. (1982). On Gluttony. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 170). New York: Paulist Press.

⁶ Climacus, J. (1982). On Chastity. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 173). New York: Paulist Press.

⁷ Matt. 4:4

⁸ Matt. 6:33