



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

Monthly Message for the Monastic and Consecrated Servants

May 2015

My beloved children,

Christ is risen. Truly He is risen.

As we celebrate these blessed Holy Fifty Days in which our Lord Jesus Christ walked amongst His disciples and confirmed them in their calling – I consider our own calling in which we too have been confirmed and the words of John Climacus who said that ‘a Christian is an imitator of Christ in thought, word and deed,’¹ and I ask myself if we truly fulfill these words. I ask myself if our life is truly an imitation of that of our Lord Jesus Christ.

If our King and Master renounced the world, was obedient until death, lived a poor and humble life serving others, was gentle and meek, ascetic and quiet, prayerful and loving, then, with His grace, we should live that same way. However, I believe that far too often we do not, and this is because of the many excuses we make to avoid the struggle it takes to reach these virtues. Climacus continues the above saying with the words, ‘as far as this is humanly possible,’ and I believe that we focus on words such as these, not in the way they are meant to be understood, but to justify our laxity and unwillingness to truly deny ourselves and carry our cross in order to be transformed into the image of the Son of God. It is for this reason that I decided that in this and the following letters, we will discuss the steps in Climacus’ *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*; beginning with ‘On Renunciation of Life’ we will explore each stage of growth and measure it against our own until we reach the final and ultimate stage of ‘faith, hope, and love’.

According to Climacus there are three reasons why one would seek to renounce the world – ‘either for the sake of the coming kingdom, or because of the number of their sins, or on account of their love for God.’² Then he continues to say something very, beautiful, ‘God who judges the contest stands waiting to see how it ends for the one who has taken on this race.’³ So, my beloved, I ask you, or rather I challenge you to convince me that the steps in this ladder are not for our generation, for it has been said to me that they are no longer practical. However, I say to you that we are running the very same race which our predecessors ran and which our successors will one day run; just because the world has changed, does not mean the battle is any different and therefore what was practical then should also be practical now.

¹ Climacus, J. (1982). On Renunciation of Life. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 74). New York: Paulist Press.

² Climacus, J. (1982). On Renunciation of Life. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 74). New York: Paulist Press.

³ Climacus, J. (1982). On Renunciation of Life. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 74). New York: Paulist Press.

Climacus states that, ‘the man turning away from the world in order to shake off the burden of his sins should imitate those who sit by the tombs outside the city. Let him not desist from ardent raging tears, from the wordless moans of the heart, until he sees Jesus Himself coming to roll back the rock of hardness off him’.⁴ He further goes on to say that this cannot be done without proper guidance or humility – ‘let us take heart and let us in total confidence carry to Christ in our right hand and confess to Him our helplessness and our fragility. We will carry away more help than we deserve, if only we constantly push ourselves down into the depths of humility.’⁵

Therefore, I ask you to tell me what is not practical about this advice? Are we not still called to a life of repentance, obedience, and humility? Perhaps novices first beginning today are more well rounded than the novices of the generations before, but the Potter who will mold you has not changed, and if we begin our journey without completely submitting to His mercy by means of humility and obedience then how will He shape us into what we are called to be?

The way we begin our journey has a profound affect on our progress – ‘a bold and eager soul will be spurred on by the memory of its first zeal and new wings can thus be obtained.’⁶ He tells us that the zeal of the monk who renounces the world for love of God will not dwindle⁷ for he who loves God will fear Him and follow His commandments. When we begin strong, hanging on with all of our might to the Him whom we renounced the world to be with, then with willingness and thankfulness we will accept what comes our way without being shaken by it and will continue to grow because of it.

I believe our issue is that we pay more attention to the fact that times have changed and almost completely forget that the foundation of our belief has not. For instance, if I were to begin a journey in a new land with an old map to guide me, I would eventually get lost because by now roads have been added and street names have changed, but though we are now living in modern times the journey itself has not changed and thus I am still trying to get from the same point a to point b. So, although I will use a new map and make use of new technology and new modes of transportation, the new means I am now utilizing will not change me as a traveller nor will these new means prevent me from remembering the destination I was originally set out for. Before God, I will fight my battle as a brave soldier, as did Joseph in Egypt, as did Moses in the wilderness, as did David before Saul, as did Daniel before the king – I will fight as did my forefathers before me to the full extent that my humanity will allow me to.

“This is the first step. Let him who has set foot on it not turn back.”⁸

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

⁴ Climacus, J. (1982). On Renunciation of Life. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 75). New York: Paulist Press.

⁵ Climacus, J. (1982). On Renunciation of Life. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 76). New York: Paulist Press.

⁶ Climacus, J. (1982). On Renunciation of Life. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 76). New York: Paulist Press.

⁷ Climacus, J. (1982). On Renunciation of Life. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 76). New York: Paulist Press.

⁸ Climacus, J. (1982). On Renunciation of Life. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 80). New York: Paulist Press.