



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

Monthly Message for the Monastic and Consecrated Servants

August 2015

My beloved,

Peace and grace.

As promised, let us continue with our letters on the steps of *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. This month we will discuss the third step, ‘On Exile,’ which John Climacus describes as, ‘an irrevocable renunciation of everything in one’s familiar surroundings that hinders one from attaining the ideal of holiness.’¹

Throughout the chapter, Climacus focuses especially on family ties and the necessity of detaching ourselves from them and later concludes by adding a section on dreams and the tricks by which we can be deceived by them. However, I would like us to focus on something, which was stated at the beginning of the chapter regarding his above definition of exile:

‘Exile is a disciplined heart, unheralded wisdom, an unpublicized understanding, a hidden life, masked ideals. It is unseen meditation, the striving to be humble, a wish for poverty, the longing for what is divine. It is an outpouring of love, a denial of vainglory, a depth of silence.’²

Let us pay attention to these words, for they do not refer to a physical separation from the world, but to an exile of the heart. Although we are in the world, we are not called to be *of* the world³ and it is an unfortunate truth that even those who are no longer in the world, within themselves can still very much be part of the world.

When I read that, ‘it is a chosen route of great grief,’⁴ I considered the true struggle of a servant of God – when we willingly choose to live a life in exile, we must daily make a sincere and conscious effort to continue carrying our cross no matter what obstacle we may perceive to be lying ahead. Climacus says, ‘if you have left the world then do not begin to

¹ Climacus, J. (1982). On Exile. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 85). New York: Paulist Press.

² Climacus, J. (1982). On Exile. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 85). New York: Paulist Press.

³ John 15:19

⁴ Climacus, J. (1982). On Exile. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 85). New York: Paulist Press.

reach out for it'⁵ however, everytime we react in carnal manner, it can be said that we have turned our backs and reached out for what is behind us.

Does it make sense that after having renounced the world and detached ourselves from its chains, we continue to live the life of our old man without any deliberate effort to change our carnal ways? Beloved, we are called to grow into the image of Christ – a thing which cannot be done if within ourselves we have no intention of making the painful choice of being cast out of our old man's comfort zone and thrown into the pit of fire and purification.

What, therefore, is exile for me? Let us keep it simple –

If I am still reacting with, '*... hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, ... and the like*'⁶ then I have not yet left the world behind. If we are not watchful then even in the monasteries and churches, our carnal behavior will seem entirely normal to us. Our anger and gossip we will justify. Our complaining will seem natural and we will defend ourselves for our lack of obedience and submission to our brethren and sisters. We will feel no remorse for our feelings of frustration and happily speak disrespectfully to each other when something does not please us. However, these behaviors are completely foreign to those who chose a life in exile.

I would like each one of us to please consider this very carefully and remember that one day, the unexpected time will come, that we will each face judgment.

'So, if you have the fire, run, since you never know when it may be doused, leaving you stranded in darkness.'⁷

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 Exile. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 86). New York: Paulist Press.

⁶ Gal. 5:20

⁷ Climacus, J. (1982). On Exile. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 86). New York: Paulist Press.