



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

Monthly Message for the Monastic and Consecrated Servants

September 2015

My beloved,

Peace and grace.

This month, our journey through *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* has brought us to one of the great virtues we know of well and which we have vowed to keep before God – the blessed virtue of obedience. Let us explore our perception of this virtue and expound on the main causes that delay us from attaining it.

I often hear it being said that true monasticism existed only in the 4th century, at a time when monks were ascetic and technology was scarce. Comparisons are made in the spirit of discouragement stating that we can never attain the same virtues, for our current means are far too different than what they once were, and that what we are taught from our desert fathers is completely impractical for us to apply today. However, I perceive these arguments to be poor excuses made by those who, simply put, do not want to trouble themselves with walking down the narrow path.

By God's grace, when there is a will, there is a way – although surrounded by foreign gods and wicked manners of life, did any of the righteous saints from the Holy Scriptures use external circumstances as excuses for forsaking the commandments of God? Highly favored and greatly honored, Saint Joseph must have felt a sense of entitlement in his father's house, never imagining that one day he would suffer greatly and lose that confidence that made him feel so secure. However, when the events of his life took an unexpected turn, his submission to the will of God humbled him and changed him into Joseph the Righteous – the saint we know today.

Therefore, obedience is not a thing of the past when the environment was more suitable for it. It is a vow we make today and a will to submit our mind, body, and soul into the hands of God Who's plans for us are far greater than we can ever comprehend. It is said that St. Joseph was a foreshadow of our Lord Jesus Christ who, *'though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him.'*¹ What a poor case we would make if on that final day, when we give an account of ourselves to God², we present to Him all of our "good reasons" for not having done what was required of us.

¹ Heb. 5:8-9

² Rom. 14:12

Our lack of obedience, or rather, the breaking of our vow, stems from within not from without; when we can finally admit this to ourselves then we can begin building that 4th century monastic ideal internally and, by the grace of God, attain the same virtues, as did the monks of old.

What, therefore, hinders us from fulfilling this blessed commandment? I perceive that there are many reasons, all of which are a result of a lack of faith in God. Consequently, this lack of faith causes us to disobey out of fear and instead rely on our own wisdom.

John Climacus said, that ‘obedience is a total renunciation of our own life, and it shows up clearly in the way we act.’³ Thus, one who is disobedient can also be said to be one who has not renounced the world – their world – for the sake of the Kingdom of God. We do this as a result of our lack of faith, which compels us to ask ‘why’ in the face of hardships and to fulfill our own will for the sake of our sense of security. Our pride will not allow us to be submissive, for by doing so, we agree to an unknown future, to unexpected events, to trials of shame and humiliation. No, but rather we choose to be in control of our lives and to stand up for ourselves when we are faced with disagreeable circumstances. However, it has been said that ‘to obey is, with all deliberateness, to put aside the capacity to make one’s own judgment’⁴ and that ‘only through shame can you be freed from shame.’⁵ Therefore, take heed my beloved, and pray always that God may free you from the bonds of your own understanding and fill you with the joy of submitting to the will of another, thereby ultimately fulfilling His will.

Where would we be if St. Mary had the spirit of disobedience? Where would we be if she began to be resentful that her parents gave her to the temple at such a young age? Would she have become rebellious and decide that the time has finally come to make her own decisions? Would she have refused the betrothal to St. Joseph? Would she have negotiation with the angel when he visited? Perhaps, but thank God that our beloved mother made no arguments and humbly obeyed God in every occasion of her blessed life. *‘More than that, blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it!’*⁶

Climacus said, ‘obedience is the burial place of the will and the resurrection of lowliness. A corpse does not contradict or debate the good or whatever seems bad, and the spiritual father who has devoutly put the disciple’s soul to death will answer for everything.’⁷ So, I wonder – if God had a great plan to accomplish on earth and looked from above to choose His servant, would He choose you? Have you, servant of the Lord, been perfectly submissive and obedient to His will since your journey with Him began? Have you given God the same assurance in you as He had in St. Mary, in Moses, in Abraham, in Job, in Daniel, in St. Joseph the Carpenter? Would God be able to say, ‘My beloved child, everything is about to go completely against your will and you are about to suffer many tribulations’⁸, but I have great plans for you⁹ and I know that you will be a faithful servant.

³ Climacus, J. (1982). On Obedience. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 91). New York: Paulist Press.

⁴ Climacus, J. (1982). On Obedience. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 92). New York: Paulist Press.

⁵ Climacus, J. (1982). On Obedience. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 108). New York: Paulist Press.

⁶ Luke 11:28

⁷ Climacus, J. (1982). On Obedience. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 92). New York: Paulist Press.

⁸ Sir. 2:1

⁹ Jer. 29:11

Do not be afraid, I am with you.’¹⁰ Or has your history been more like Saul’s – knowing what is right, but for the sake of your pride and external circumstances, you argue and disobey the will of God? ‘There are some living in obedience who, on noticing the kindness and indulgence of their superior, seek his permission to follow their own wishes. They ought to know that if they get this, they deprive themselves completely of their confessor’s crown. Obedience is foreign to hypocrisy and willfulness.’¹¹ Remember Climacus’ words, that only ‘the devil cannot act contrary to his own will.’¹²

Beloved, we have been given the perfect example to follow – it is He for whom we have given our lives. We must love Him: *‘If you love Me, keep My commandments.’*¹³ We must know Him: *‘Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, “I know Him,” and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.’*¹⁴ We must imitate Him: *‘But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him. He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked.’*¹⁵

True monasticism is not a thing of the past. True obedience does not change with time. If it is your hearts’ desire to follow in the footsteps before you and present yourself as a living sacrifice to God, then learn to be humble through submitting to the will of another. Climacus encourages us by saying that, ‘those living in stillness and subject to a father have only demons working against them. But those living in a community have to fight both demons and human beings. The first kind keep the commandments of their master more strictly since they are always under his scrutiny, while the latter break them to some extent on account of his being away. Still, the zealous and the hard-working more than compensate for this failing by their persistence, and accordingly they win double crowns.’¹⁶ Have faith in God and lean not on your own understanding¹⁷ and He will glorify you with Him.¹⁸

‘This step is of equal number with the evangelists. Keep running athlete, and do not be afraid.’¹⁹

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

Glory be to God forever. Amen.

¹⁰ Isa. 41:10

¹¹ Climacus, J. (1982). On Obedience. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 114). New York: Paulist Press.

¹² Climacus, J. (1982). On Obedience. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 114). New York: Paulist Press.

¹³ John 14:15

¹⁴ 1 John 2:3-4

¹⁵ 1 John 2:5-6

¹⁶ Climacus, J. (1982). On Obedience. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 110). New York: Paulist Press.

¹⁷ Prov. 3:5

¹⁸ 2 Tim 2:12

¹⁹ Climacus, J. (1982). On Obedience. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 120). New York: Paulist Press.