



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

Monthly Message for the Monastic and Consecrated Servants

October 2015

Dear Beloved,

Peace and grace.

As we discuss the chapter on penitence in *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, I would like to share a story of a monk who had previously lived a prodigal life –

After his turning point, everything for him changed. He saw himself as undeserving of any of God’s graces and so, when he would fall and injure anyone at all, he was quick to humble himself in prayer and ask for his Father’s forgiveness and strength so that he may do His will, rise once again and ask his neighbor’s forgiveness. His ‘prison’, which John Climacus speaks about, was the whole of his heart. No, he was not outwardly living the same penitence as the monks described in this chapter but internally I would indeed say that he was.

This young man had developed many poor habits along the years and his heart had become stone, his ears deaf and his eyes blind. His prolonged distance from God filled him with anger and arrogance and he lived every day desiring only to fulfill his passions. Saint John the Short said, ‘The monk toils at all he does. That is what a monk is’¹ and so it was with this young man who became a monk. Thus his ‘prison’ was not a physical building but the chambers of his heart where he daily fought an internal battle to maintain that fire that God placed to purify him.

What about us, my beloved? When we break the commandments of God in even the slightest manner, do we sentence ourselves to ‘prison’ or do we add sin to sin by letting the little foxes² go unnoticed until we lose that sensitivity that God inflamed in us by the Holy Spirit – that feeling of not being able to endure even the slightest blemish on our soul? How easy it is to grow cold.

¹ Ward, B. (1975). John the Dwarf. In *The sayings of the Desert Fathers: The alphabetical collection* (p. 93). London: Mowbrays.

² Song Sol. 2:15

‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God’³ – and so what of us who speak ill of our brethren, object when something displeases us, rebel against authority? What of us who are lax and lukewarm? What of us who condemn others and defend ourselves? What of us who complain in order to protect ourselves and seek our own? Such things have unfortunately become acceptable.

‘For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul’⁴ – it is very simple, my beloved – we either gain the world by protecting our reputation in order to seek glory from man or we let no sin pass unnoticed but rather rush at every opportunity to humble ourselves and inherit the kingdom of heaven.

Let us ask ourselves what are we trying to gain in this life? Is it status? Is it to have authority over others? Is it to be masters over our own lives? Is it to be favored by our elders? *‘Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward.’⁵*

Or is rather to find rest in our service and run away from hardship? *‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented.’⁶*

If we are sojourning on this earth to make a name for ourselves and gain the world then yes, let us defend ourselves, let us revise our confessions to appear righteous in the eyes of our father, let us complain so we can find rest, let us refuse to submit but rather seek submission from others, let us succumb to our ego and hide our faults, let us do our will rather than God’s. Yes, let us make our enemy proud of us and break our Father’s heart.

Beloved, have we not all chosen to serve God? Then if a servant is not above his master⁷ why do we seek to be? Let us instead say with David, *‘my sin is ever before me’⁸* and be zealous to maintain the purity of our hearts and calling.

‘And what I say to you, I say to all: ‘Watch!’⁹

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

Glory be to God forever. Amen.

³ Matt. 5:8

⁴ Mark 8:36-37

⁵ Matt. 6:2

⁶ Luke 16:25

⁷ Matt. 10:24

⁸ Ps. 51:3

⁹ Mark 13:37