



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

Monthly Message for the Monastic and Consecrated Servants

December 2015

Dear Beloved,

Peace and grace.

By God's grace, we are now on step 7 of *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* – 'On Mourning' – we have climbed the stages of leaving the world behind by renouncing life and detaching ourselves from all worldly attachments; we have gone into exile and chosen the pure life of obedience and repentance; we have before us always the remembrance of death and now we have begun to walk the path of the saints into a life of humble mourning and contrition.

John Climacus says that 'those making some progress in blessed mourning are usually temperate and untalkative. Those who have succeeded in making real progress do not become angry and do not bear grudges. As for the perfect-these are humble, they long for dishonor, they look out for involuntary sufferings, they do not condemn sinners and they are inordinately compassionate.'¹ In the next few letters, I would like us to take a deeper look into the characteristics Climacus mentions in these three stages.

For those making progress – we see in them the virtue of temperance and silence.

A monk is blessed to have his day begin very early, which gives him the opportunity to stand before God while the rest of the world is busy or asleep. If during this quiet time, he takes the opportunity to truly pray, his spirit will also make intercessions for him² and God will fill him with His peace. Before leaving his cell to attend the Midnight Praises, he will seek from God that which will help him live his day in a way worthy of the calling with which he was called.³ If he continues his day in like manner, it is doubtful that this monk will behave with intemperance without any attempt to restrain himself. He will be careful and watchful of his actions; he will maintain a prayerful heart and the remembrance of his sins will prevent him from judging others or speaking too much.

I imagine it would be much different for the monk who wakes up late, rushes to get ready, and immediately heads out of his cell having not spoken to his Creator at all. Or more so for the one who was given time but wasted it with vain thoughts – 'for it is just when they [demons] see us at prayer that they come and stand beside us, ready to attack, suggesting to our intellect the very things we should not think about when praying; in this way they try to take our intellect captive and to make our prayer and supplication vain

¹ Climacus, J. (1982). On Mourning. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 136). New York: Paulist Press.

² Rom. 8:26

³ Eph. 4:1

and useless.’⁴

If we were to truly make a conscious effort to walk circumspectly and redeem the time⁵, I think we would be much less concerned with the things which currently occupy our thoughts and much more concerned with God. Climacus says that you should ‘let the thought of eternal fire lie down with you in the evening and get up with you in the morning. Then indolence will never overwhelm you when it is time to sing the psalms.’⁶ And to help us attain this, he suggests that we wear something to encourage us in our mourning – ‘Those who lament the dead wear black!’⁷

I would like to ask you a question: did you enter this life in order to change or because it seemed to be a lifestyle that comfortably fits your needs? If it was to change and to be renewed, then I would like you to examine yourself and draw a comparison from your first day in the monastery until now and see what has actually changed within you. Surely God has not ceased to purify you by means of trials and simple opportunities to deny your will – how have you responded?

Without an alert mind, our monastic life is no different than our life in the world. If we are slack, instead of taking advantage of the great blessing we have of dedicating our entire life to the Lord, we instead dedicate only what is required and spend the rest of our time in our self-will, self-indulgence, and useless chatter.

If we were called by God to deny our will and we willfully chose this life to do exactly that, then why are we often complaining? If we agree that a monastic is to be guided – unlike someone living independently in the world – then why are we often arguing? Have we a better plan for our salvation than God? Saint Augustine said, ‘if you believe what you like in the Gospels, and reject what you don’t like, it is not the Gospel you believe, but yourself.’ It is the same for a monk that lives as he sees fit rather than by what God chooses for him in his monastic life.

Regarding self-indulgence, it will help you to consider Climacus’ words: ‘Think of your lying in bed as an image of the lying in your grave; then you will not sleep so much. When you eat at table, remember the food of worms; then you will not live so highly. When you drink water, remember the thirst of the flames; then you will certainly do violence to your nature.’⁸

If you feel it is your nature to be talkative, then remember that ‘the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force’⁹ – so I urge you to struggle to receive a crown in heaven and practice self-control when you speak – *‘have you heard a word? Let it die with you. Take courage it will not burst you. But a fool will suffer birth-pangs because of such a word, like a woman in labor with a child.’*¹⁰

⁴ . (1979). Evagrios the Solitary—Outline Teaching on Asceticism and Stillness in the Solitary Life. In *The Philokalia* (p. 71). London.

⁵ Eph. 5:15-16

⁶ Climacus, J. (1982). On Mourning. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 138). New York: Paulist Press.

⁷ Climacus, J. (1982). On Mourning. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 138). New York: Paulist Press.

⁸ Climacus, J. (1982). On Mourning. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 138). New York: Paulist Press.

⁹ Matt. 11:12

¹⁰ Sir. 19:10-11

Struggle, my beloved, and do not let the days go by wasted with concerns that will not help you on the Day of Judgment – ‘I have seen small teardrops shed like drops of blood, and I have seen floods of tears poured out with no trouble at all. So I judge toilers by their struggles rather than their tears; and I suspect that God does so too.’¹¹

What prevents you from answering yes to this question: ‘Has any one ever lived so piously under a monastic regime that he never missed a day or hour or moment, but spent all his time for the Lord? And remember that never in your life can you see the same day twice’!¹²

‘When we die, we will not be criticized for having failed to work miracles. We will not be accused of having failed to be theologians or contemplatives. But we will certainly have some explanation to offer to God for not having mourned unceasingly.’¹³

‘Such, then, is the seventh step. May he who has been found worthy of it help me too. He himself has already been helped, for by taking this seventh step he has washed away the stains of the world.’¹⁴

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

Glory be to God forever. Amen.

¹¹ Climacus, J. (1982). On Mourning. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 138). New York: Paulist Press.

¹² Climacus, J. (1982). On Mourning. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 140). New York: Paulist Press.

¹³ Climacus, J. (1982). On Mourning. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 145). New York: Paulist Press.

¹⁴ Climacus, J. (1982). On Mourning. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 145). New York: Paulist Press.