



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

Monthly Message for the Monastic and Consecrated Servants

March 2016

My beloved children,

Peace and grace.

As we carry on to the tenth step of *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* – On Slander – I would like for us to reflect on both the actions of he who slanders and the reactions of he who is being slandered and to examine both of these from the theme of love and prayer.

John Climacus speaks of something worse than ‘girls who flaunt their shamelessness,’¹ which is those who ‘put on the appearance of great modesty while secretly engaging in abominable behavior. [...] They put on a show of doing one thing and then act otherwise.’² If we are not watchful, this act of hypocrisy can secretly find itself spreading in many aspects of our behavior – if our thoughts are not chiefly occupied with love and worship then we are being deceived and we are no longer walking the narrow path we were first set to travel. Let me elaborate...

Where does slander come from? According to Climacus, ‘Slander is the offspring of hatred,’³ and since hatred is contrary to love, how can we claim to live a life of prayer if we defame our brother/sister? Perhaps when we first consecrated our lives to God, we could find no place for anything but love and sacrifice in our hearts – we loved God and serving Him, we loved our brethren/sisters and we brought ‘*every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ*’⁴ since we felt as though we were standing in His presence at all times. Unfortunately, as time progressed and our thorns began to surface, love began to be pushed aside to make room for vice and our simple thoughts began to be preoccupied with anything other than what was commanded of us – “ ‘*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind*’ and ‘*your neighbor as yourself.*’ ”⁵ So, it is not only an issue of slander but a greater issue of digression and deviation from our purpose.

When we find ourselves speaking about one another, we should stop immediately and consider if what we are doing is right in the eyes of God. Ask yourself: if our Lord Jesus Christ was the third person in this discussion would I continue having it? “I have rebuked

¹ Climacus, J. (1982). On Slander. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 155). New York: Paulist Press.

² Climacus, J. (1982). On Slander. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 155). New York: Paulist Press.

³ Climacus, J. (1982). On Slander. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 155). New York: Paulist Press.

⁴ 2 Cor. 10:5

⁵ Luke 10:27

people who were engaged in slander, and, in self-defense, these evildoers claimed to be acting out of love and concern for the victim of their slander. My answer to that was to say: 'Then stop that kind of love, or else you will be making a liar out of him who declared, *'I drove away the man who secretly slandered his neighbor'* (Ps. 100:5). If, as you insist, you love that man, then do not be making a mockery of him, but pray for him in secret, for this is the kind of love that is acceptable to the Lord.'⁶ I promise you, my beloved, that while one of us wastes time chatting, somewhere else is another one of us is growing closer to God in prayer.

'Fire and water do not mix, neither can you mix judgment of others with the desire to repent.'⁷ So, leave the matter to God, my beloved, and regain your focus on what is needed – *'Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her.'*⁸ Grow daily in your relationship with God through prayer and understanding of the Holy Scriptures – do not waste your time in idle chatter – and if the matter directly affects your relationship with your brother/sister, then speak to him/her directly for *'open rebuke is better than love carefully concealed.'*⁹ However, I urge you to be honest with yourself and to be watchful of your intentions – if you find that you are reacting from a place of insecurity within you, or out of anger, envy, or jealousy, then call out to God, 'Lord, save me'¹⁰ and hold your peace for the sake of your soul and that of your brother/sister.

As for you who are being slandered – what happened to your willingness to patiently endure in silence? How quickly that desire fled from you the moment you heard of what was being said about you. Very quick you are to retaliate and defend yourself and slow you are to bear the blessing of the injury and pray. 'For if he thinks he is repentant and nevertheless attempts to refute the person who - rightly or wrongly - is judging him, he is not worthy of the grace of forgiveness, since he acts as if he seeks a hearing in court and the opportunity to justify himself, hoping to achieve what he wants through a due process of law. Such behavior is entirely at odds with the Lord's commandments. And naturally so; for if one attempts to justify oneself, then one is appealing to lawful rights, not to love for one's fellow-men. In such a case grace is no longer our guiding principle - the grace that justifies the ungodly without the works of righteousness (cf. Rom. 4:5), but only on condition that we are grateful for rebukes and endure them with forbearance, giving thanks to those who rebuke us and remaining patient and unresentful before our accusers. In this way our prayer will be pure and our repentance effective. For the more we pray for those who slander and accuse us, the more God pacifies those who bear enmity towards us and also gives us peace through our pure and persistent prayer.'¹¹

At times, the one being slandered justifies his/her anger by claiming to vent his/her feelings in order to attain inner peace – but I ask you: if you are upset for being slandered, then why do you slander in return? If you cannot endure in silence, then rather

⁶ Climacus, J. (1982). On Slander. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 155). New York: Paulist Press.

⁷ Climacus, J. (1982). On Slander. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 156). New York: Paulist Press.

⁸ Luke 10:41-42

⁹ Prov. 27:5

¹⁰ Matt. 14:30

¹¹ . (1979). St Peter of Damaskos Book1 A Treasury of Divine Knowledge Spiritual Reading. In *The Philokalia* (p. 718). London. Faber and Faber.

than allow tension to grow, pray and speak to your brother/sister the ‘*truth in love*’¹² and share your feelings; if they share the matter with you directly and it turns out that you had committed an error, then do not feign to be naïve but be courageous and admit your mistake.

If you feel persecuted and there is no opportunity to discuss the matter, then take this blessed opportunity to grow – ‘To the extent that you pray with all your soul for the person who slanders you, God will make the truth known to those who have been scandalized by the slander.’¹³ Yes, it hurts to be slandered, and ‘no one can be indifferent to it except those who like Susanna have their eyes firmly fixed on God. For only God has the power to rescue from peril, as He rescued her, to convince men of the truth, as He did in her case, and to encourage the soul with hope.’¹⁴

In the end, whether you are inclined to slander or you are being the one slandered, remember that ‘the ears were given us, not to listen to slander and stupidities, but to hear the word of God and every form of speech - of men, birds or anything else - that leads as to glorify the Creator.’¹⁵ So, stop and focus on what is needed.

Be a good example for others to follow. Perhaps putting your brother/sister down will help you attain what you want on this earth, but remember that one day you will have to answer for yourself before the judgment seat of God.¹⁶ ‘Do good to one who wrongs you, and God will be your friend. Never slander your enemy. Practice love, restraint and moderation, patience, self-control and the like. For this is knowledge of God: to follow Him through humility and other such virtues. These are the actions not of every man, but of one whose soul possesses spiritual understanding.’¹⁷

‘I knew a man who sinned openly but repented in secret.’¹⁸ Thus, unless you are an examiner of hearts, ‘do not condemn. Not even if your very eyes are seeing something, for they may be deceived’¹⁹, but rather lift your hands in prayer to the true Judge who will weigh the matter properly. ‘A charitable and sensible mind takes careful note of the virtues it observes in another, while the fool goes looking for faults and defects.’²⁰

‘This is the tenth step, and he who succeeds in it has practiced love or mourning.’²¹

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

¹² Eph. 4:15

¹³ . (1979). St Maximos the Confessor Four Hundred Texts on Love First Century. In *The Philokalia* (p. 342). London. Faber and Faber.

¹⁴ . (1979). St Maximos the Confessor Four Hundred Texts on Love First Century. In *The Philokalia* (p. 342). London.

¹⁵ . (1979). St Peter of Damaskos Book1 A Treasury of Divine Knowledge Spiritual Reading. In *The Philokalia* (p. 718). London. Faber and Faber.

¹⁶ Matt. 12:36

¹⁷ . (1979). St Antony the Great On the Character of Men and on the Virtuous Life One Hundred and Seventy Text. In *The Philokalia* (p. 354). London. Faber and Faber.

¹⁸ Climacus, J. (1982). On Slander. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 156). New York: Paulist Press.

¹⁹ Climacus, J. (1982). On Slander. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 157). New York: Paulist Press.

²⁰ Climacus, J. (1982). On Slander. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 157). New York: Paulist Press.

²¹ Climacus, J. (1982). On Slander. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 157). New York: Paulist Press.