



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

Monthly Message for the Monastic and Consecrated Servants

July 2016

My dear children,

I would like to share with you a true story.

Recently during one of my church visits, I walked in to the church for Divine Liturgy and had the strangest experience. On my way to stand before the Holy Altar, as some of the deacons were chanting, I notice that some of them were leaning against the altar wall and most of the congregation members were sitting down; and not just sitting down, but some even had their legs stretched out across the pew. I also noticed that women had their hair uncovered and some were walking from pew to pew in full conversation. I think I even saw someone eating! Then, when came time for the deacons to dress, I found some of them prostrated in corners of the altar and actually asleep!

Are you shocked yet? Although this story is a true story, it did not happen to me or in one of the churches I was visiting, but unfortunately it sometimes happens when we ourselves come to pray. Suffice it to say that this month's letter will cover the thirteenth step of the Ladder of Divine Ascent: On Despondency.

John Climacus said that ‘the real men of spirit can be seen at the time when tedium strikes, for nothing gains so many crowns for a monk as the struggle against this.’¹ If we are quick to repent, God will empower us and we can return once again to the battle, however the opposite is also true. If we give up the fight, if we put down our guard, if even just for a moment, we immediately find ourselves wounded – struck by the arrow of despondency and suffering from its effects. So then how do we prevent this from happening? Let us first discuss some causes and effects and then we can take a look at how we can prevent or overcome despondency when we are faced with it.

Climacus mentions talkativeness, disobedience, forgetfulness of sins, self-pity and slackness in labor as potential causes of despondency. I think that if we were to look into the essence of the issue, we would find that in each case, the monk has lost sight of his goal. If a monk behaves in any of the abovementioned manners, then surely he has forgotten why he left the world and joined the monastery. Where is there room for idle talk in the day of a monastic? What drives a monk to disobey his elders, put the blame on others, grieve over his trials, and become unfaithful in his work? Surely he has forgotten all that zeal he had and all those promises he made when he first entered the monastery; he is now far from being an example of humility, obedience, and love and has now become more

¹ Climacus, J. (1982). On Despondency. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 163). New York: Paulist Press.

of a rights activist, often proclaiming justice, complaining about others and making demands to suit his needs.

If the now wounded monk is slow to rise then the consequences of his tedium begin to unfold. This wounded monk is the first one to grumble, the first one to claim injustice, and the first one to put others down. He seems to never be satisfied with what he has and passively behaves in rebellious ways against authority. This wounded monk is known to be suffering by ‘a neglect of religious exercises,’² ‘an approval of worldly things’³, ‘laziness in the singing of psalms, a weakness in prayer, a stubborn urge for service, [...] and an indifference to the requirement of obedience.’⁴ However, the good news for him is that ‘when the psalms do not have to be sung, tedium does not arise’!⁵

Climacus says, ‘at the third hour, the devil of tedium causes shivering, headache, and vertigo. By the ninth hour, the patient has recovered his strength, and when dinner is ready, he jumps out of bed. But now when the time for prayer comes, his body begins to languish once more. He begins his prayers, but the tedium makes him sleepy and the verses of the psalms are snatched from his mouth by untimely yawns.’⁶ He further states: ‘note how tedium hits you when you are standing, and if you sit down, it suggests that it would be a good thing to lean back. It suggests that you prop yourself up against the walls of your cell. It produces noise and footsteps – and there you go peeping out of the window.’⁷

A monk fully armed will know despondency when it comes for although it ‘reminds those at prayer of some job to be done, and in her brutish way she searches out any plausible excuse to drag us from prayer,’⁸ he will not abandon his post. Although he feels the passions stirring up within him and a rebellious spirit suggesting he behave in ways unbecoming of a monk, he fights against it. When it tells him to sit, he stands. When it tells him to rebel, he submits. When it claims unfairness, he remembers his sins. When it suggests postponing, he acts immediately. A true fighter knows his strength lies in God and is not easily overcome.

So we ask: “ ‘Who can destroy you?’ And tedium may be constrained to reply: ‘I cannot lay my head among those who are truly obedient, and I live quietly where I may. I have many mothers; Stolidity of Soul, Forgetfulness of the Things of Heaven, or, sometimes, Too Heavy a Burden of Troubles. My children who live with me are Changing from Place to Place, Disobedience to One's Superior, Forgetfulness of the Judgment to Come, and sometimes, the Abandonment of One's Vocation. The singing of psalms and manual labor are my opponents by whom I am now bound. My enemy is the thought of death, but what really slays me is prayer backed by a firm hope in the blessings of the future.’”⁹

“This is the thirteenth victory. He who has won it is really outstanding in all virtue.”¹⁰

² Climacus, J. (1982). On Despondency. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 162). New York: Paulist Press.

³ Climacus, J. (1982). On Despondency. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 162). New York: Paulist Press.

⁴ Climacus, J. (1982). On Despondency. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 162). New York: Paulist Press.

⁵ Climacus, J. (1982). On Despondency. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 163). New York: Paulist Press.

⁶ Climacus, J. (1982). On Despondency. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 163). New York: Paulist Press.

⁷ Climacus, J. (1982). On Despondency. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 163). New York: Paulist Press.

⁸ Climacus, J. (1982). On Despondency. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 163). New York: Paulist Press.

⁹ Climacus, J. (1982). On Despondency. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 163). New York: Paulist Press.

¹⁰ Climacus, J. (1982). On Despondency. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 164). New York: Paulist Press.

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