



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States Monthly Message for the Monastic and Consecrated Servants September 2016

My dearly beloved,

Peace and grace.

This month, let us return to our journey through *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* and explore the fourteenth step – one of our favorite subjects – gluttony. Although it is clearly a vice, it unfortunately remains something we often still take lightly. We will therefore address the issue and then discuss its practical application in our lives.

*‘Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshy lusts which war against the soul.’*¹ The essence of fasting being exactly that – a war in which we enlist in order to rise above the flesh and gain the great virtue of self-control. John Climacus tells us to control our appetites before they control us² for ‘The belly is the cause of all human shipwreck’³ for ‘No one whose stomach is full can fight mentally against the demon of unchastity’⁴ and thus it is first through the stomach that we begin the work of purifying the soul.

‘Abba John the Dwarf said, “If a king wanted to take possession of his enemy's city, he would begin by cutting off the water and the food and so his enemies, dying of hunger, would submit to him. It is the same with the passions of the flesh: if a man goes about fasting and hungry the enemies of his soul grow weak.”’⁵ Therefore, *‘Do not be deceived by the filling of the belly’*⁶ for I perceive that when we take this matter lightly and we ‘think up seasonings and create sweet recipes’⁷ we never truly learn how to control our natural inclinations. Of the following two monks, which do you think is more likely to accept what is asked of him without arguing: the one who thanks God and eats moderately whatever is given him or the one who makes requests and fills his dish with a variety of flavors and items? Just as a college student first has to attain a certain academic status in order to be accepted into a more demanding program, so to does a monk first have to restrain his stomach in order to climb the ladder to greater virtues, which stem from self-control and self-denial. I imagine that he who is simple and temperate with his food – making no demands – will also be simple in many others aspects in his spiritual life. *‘He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much’*⁸.

¹ 1 Pet 2:11

² Climacus, J. (1982). On Gluttony. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 167). New York: Paulist Press.

³ Climacus, J. (1982). On Gluttony. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 167). New York: Paulist Press.

⁴ Cassian, J. (1979). *St John Cassian On the Eight Vices Written for Bishop Kastor On Control of the Stomach*. In *Philokalia* (p. 74). Faber and Faber.

⁵ Ward, B. (1975). *The sayings of the Desert Fathers: The alphabetical collection* (Vol. 59, Cistercian Studies). London: Mowbrays.

⁶ Prov. 24:15

⁷ Climacus, J. (1982). On Gluttony. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 165). New York: Paulist Press.

⁸ Luke 16:10

‘The Jew celebrates on Sabbaths and feast days. The gluttonous monk celebrates on Saturdays and Sundays. He counts the days to Easter, and for days in advance he gets the food ready. The slave of the belly ponders the menu with which to celebrate the feast. The servant of God, however, thinks of the graces that may enrich him.’⁹ The careless monk will abstain when it is time for abstinence, will eat vegan meals, until he is full, when it is time to eat, and will eat everything else when time and season permits – all this being done without any self-control or denial, therefore reaping no spiritual benefit.

Practically speaking, we should do all things in moderation, for the middle way saved many. ‘Someone who fasts for too long, they [the Desert Fathers] say, often ends up by eating too much food.’¹⁰ In this case, we become ‘like he who demolishes what he has built... all in vain!’¹¹ In order to avoid this, the Thrice-Blessed His Holiness Pope Shenouda III, of Blessed Memory, suggested not to rush immediately to food when the time comes to eat, but to resist if even for a few moments – ‘Let the spirit, not the hour [nor the flesh] guide you’¹² for, he said, that ‘Two minutes [of] prayer while hungry is better than hours [of prayer] when full.’¹³

Climacus mentions a story regarding Evagrius to teach us temperance: ‘He [Evagrius] says: “When our soul wants different foods, keep it on bread and water.” A statement that is like telling a child to climb the entire ladder in a single stride. So let us reject him and say: When our soul wants different foods, it is looking for what is proper to its nature. Hence, we have to be very cunning in the way we deal with this most skillful opponent. Unless we are caught up in some crisis or unless we happen to be doing penance for some particular failings, what we ought to do is to deny ourselves fattening foods, then foods that warm us up, then whatever happens to make our food especially pleasant. Give yourself food that is satisfying and easily digestible, thereby counteracting endless hunger by giving yourself plenty. In this way we may be freed from too great a longing for food as though from a plague by rapid evacuation. And we should note too that most food that inflates the stomach also encourages desire.’¹⁴

John Cassian said, ‘They [the Desert Fathers] have not given us only a single rule for fasting or a single standard and measure for eating, because not everyone has the same strength; age, illness or delicacy of body create differences. But they have given us all a single goal: to avoid over-eating and the filling of our bellies.’¹⁵ ‘A clear rule for self-control handed down by the Fathers is this: stop eating while still hungry and do not continue until you are satisfied. When the Apostle said, ‘Make no provision to fulfill the desires of the flesh’ (Rom. 13:14), he was not forbidding us to provide for the needs of life; he was warning us against self-indulgence. Moreover, by itself abstinence from food does not contribute to perfect purity of soul unless the other virtues are active as well.’¹⁶

⁹ Climacus, J. (1982). On Gluttony. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 165). New York: Paulist Press.

¹⁰ Cassian, J. (1979). *St John Cassian On the Eight Vices Written for Bishop Kastor On Control of the Stomach*. In *Philokalia* (p. 74). Faber and Faber.

¹¹ H.H. Pope Shenouda. (1990). *The Spirituality of Fasting*. Al-Qāhirah: Dar El Tebaa El Kawmia.

¹² H.H. Pope Shenouda. (1990). *The Spirituality of Fasting*. Al-Qāhirah: Dar El Tebaa El Kawmia.

¹³ H.H. Pope Shenouda. (1990). *The Spirituality of Fasting*. Al-Qāhirah: Dar El Tebaa El Kawmia.

¹⁴ Climacus, J. (1982). On Gluttony. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 167). New York: Paulist Press.

¹⁵ Cassian, J. (1979). *St John Cassian On the Eight Vices Written for Bishop Kastor On Control of the Stomach*. In *Philokalia* (p. 74). Faber and Faber.

¹⁶ Cassian, J. (1979). *St John Cassian On the Eight Vices Written for Bishop Kastor On Control of the Stomach*. In *Philokalia* (p. 74). Faber and Faber.

Gluttony should be taken seriously. ‘All the saints who perfected fasting were famous for their vigil. We also see that the disciples' eyes grew heavy in the orchard after the two dinners, that they could not sit up with the Lord even for one hour. (Matt 4:2).’¹⁷ In fact, a hungry person longs for prayer, while he who is full often forgets. That is why most faithful people pray before eating.’¹⁸

‘If you have promised Christ to travel the straight and narrow road, then keep your stomach in check; for if you give in to it, if you enlarge it, you are breaking your promise. Listen and hear the word of warning: “Wide and spacious is the road of gluttony. It leads to the catastrophe of fornication, and there are many who travel that way. The gate is narrow and the way of fasting is hard, that way leading to the life of purity, and there are few to make the journey” (cf. Matt 7:13-14).’¹⁹

‘Make the effort, however little, and the Lord will quickly come to help you.’²⁰

‘Victory over this vice is a brave one. He who is able to achieve it should hasten towards dispassion and total chastity.’²¹

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

Glory be to God forever. Amen.

¹⁷ H.H. Pope Shenouda. (1990). *The Spirituality of Fasting*. Al-Qāhirah: Dar El Tebaa El Kawmia.

¹⁸ H.H. Pope Shenouda. (1990). *The Spirituality of Fasting*. Al-Qāhirah: Dar El Tebaa El Kawmia.

¹⁹ Climacus, J. (1982). On Gluttony. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 169). New York: Paulist Press.

²⁰ Climacus, J. (1982). On Gluttony. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 168). New York: Paulist Press.

²¹ Climacus, J. (1982). On Gluttony. In *The ladder of Divine Ascent* (p. 170). New York: Paulist Press.