



## **Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States**

### **Monthly Message for the Monastic and Consecrated Servants**

**November 2016**

My children,

Why have you chosen this calling? Who have you come to serve? Have you come here for yourself or for the glory of God?

Recall the story of the man named Hafez Naguib who entered the monastic life to escape from authorities. So cunning were his ways that, in a short time, he managed to gain everyone's favor and was even elected to become bishop! However, our merciful God, who knows all things, exposed his sin and revealed his deception, and Hafez Naguib once again fled from God. He was a man who, outwardly, seemed virtuous, but who inwardly was full of deceit. He was a man who thought himself shrewd, but whose greatest victim was himself.

My children, when we behave in ways unbecoming of one whose life is consecrated to God, do we not also deceive ourselves? Consider what makes it so difficult for us to endure trials and examine whether or not we make claims of righteousness but when faced with an obstacle, we react in just the opposite manner. Do we proclaim to be faithful to our vows of poverty, chastity and obedience but seek comfort, speak poorly of our brothers/sisters and obey only those in authority by whom we may gain special advantage? Let us examine ourselves and answer these questions honestly.

Poverty is a virtue that stems from the denial of our will. Therefore, let us ask ourselves if when asked to serve with others do we find ourselves desiring to be in the position of authority? Do we have a difficult time giving up our opinion and yielding to the opinion of others? Saint Isaac the Syrian said that 'As long as a man chooses to be free from possessions, departure from life arises in his mind.'<sup>1</sup> Thus if one desires to hold fast to their opinion, their thoughts are grounded in the soil of this world and not in the life to come. He further said, 'If you have possessions, distribute them at once; but if you have none, do not desire any. Sweep your cell clean of every delicacy and superfluous article, and this will lead you to abstinence even against your will. Scarcity in all things teaches a man patience; but whenever we enjoy possessions, we are unable to control ourselves.'<sup>2</sup> Reflect on these words not simply concerning material goods, but concerning the intangible possessions we refuse to let go. And when we give something up, we should not do so with expectations, as St. Isaac also said, 'When you do good to someone, do not wait a recompense from him, and you will receive repayment from God on both

---

<sup>1</sup> Saint Isaac the Syrian. *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*. Boston, MA: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1984.

<sup>2</sup> Saint Isaac the Syrian. *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*. Boston, MA: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1984.

accounts; and if you are able, neither do good so as to receive reward in the future age, but rather, practice virtue because of the love of God.<sup>3</sup>

Chastity does not refer only to the purity of our body but also to that of the mind. It is not only chastity from the lusts of the flesh, but among other things, it is also chastity from the lust of esteem and glory and from unclean thoughts towards our brothers/sisters. ‘Not he is chaste who, in the strain and crisis of combat and struggle, says that shameful thoughts cease within him, but rather he who, by the uprightness of his heart, makes the vision of his mind so pure that he cannot gaze on lewd thoughts without shame.’<sup>4</sup> As servants of God, we should fight against any thought, which is otherwise not pleasing to God and we should strive to love always and with all our hearts. ‘Those who preserve in the midst of temptations are never allowed by providence to come into the hands of demons, especially if they kiss the feet of the brethren, and cover their faults and hide them as if they were their own.’<sup>5</sup> We should remember these words when we feel the urge to complain about our brothers/sisters.

Obedience is a vow which none of us had any issues taking or accepting to take when we first joined the monastery. However, once we joined, it seemed to be the first vow we had no problem breaking. We somehow convince ourselves that if the request is not logical, it is okay to argue it. “They said this of Abba Silvanus that, as he was walking to Scetis one day with the old men, and wishing to demonstrate his disciple Mark’s obedience, and show the reason for his affection of him, he said to him, seeing a small wild boar, ‘Boy, do you see that little buffalo? He said to him, ‘Yes, Abba.’ And do you see his horns, how attractive they are?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Abba.’ The old men were astonished at his reply and edified by his obedience.”<sup>6</sup> Perhaps we may read this and feel that we always obey our elders; in this case, let us ask ourselves if our obedience is partial and directed only to them or is it also extended to the requests of our brothers/sisters. Even more tragic than disobeying our elders is our refusal to obey a request simply because it comes from our brother/sister. In such cases, we often do not even consider that the vow of obedience applies. But I tell you that it surely does. Let us examine ourselves carefully, through the grace of the Holy Spirit, and see what motivation lies behind our prejudice and correct our ways.

May we walk this path as a faithful servant of God, carrying our cross, keeping our vows, and teaching our ‘heart to guard that which your tongue teaches’<sup>7</sup> that we may never be asked the question, ‘Friend, why have you come?’<sup>8</sup>

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

Glory be to God forever. Amen.

---

<sup>3</sup> Saint Isaac the Syrian. *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*. Boston, MA: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1984.

<sup>4</sup> Saint Isaac the Syrian. *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*. Boston, MA: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1984.

<sup>5</sup> Saint Isaac the Syrian. *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*. Boston, MA: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1984.

<sup>6</sup> Ward, B. (1975). *The sayings of the Desert Fathers: The alphabetical collection*. London: Mowbrays.

<sup>7</sup> Ward, B. (1975). *The sayings of the Desert Fathers: The alphabetical collection*. London: Mowbrays.

<sup>8</sup> Matt. 26:50