



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

Monthly Message for the Monastic and Consecrated Servants

January 2017

Dear beloved,

Peace and grace.

By God's grace, a new year has begun – how loving is our God who still grants us the blessing of monasticism eighteen centuries after it originally began. Unarguably times have changed and thus the monastic setting today may be unlike what it was in the third century, but the heart of monasticism is not something meant to adapt to its environment and should therefore be no different in our current lives than it was in the lives of our forefathers.

The question then is: what *is* the heart of monasticism? From the words of Abbot Isaac, 'The aim of every monk and the perfection of his heart tends to continual and unbroken perseverance in prayer'.¹ Amongst many things, prayer is the answer to seeking God's will and it is the armor we use to fight our battles. Prayer is indeed the true work of the monk and the heart of monasticism. Nevertheless, prayer, notwithstanding our devotion to it, is left wanting if found without good works.

There is a verse we all know very well from Proverbs chapter 3, which tells us not to lean on our own understanding,² unfortunately however, like many other verses in the Holy Bible, we use such references only when it is convenient for us. When the circumstance calls for us to put aside our ego, then instead of a verse like the one just mentioned, we would rather find another more aligned with our will and less alluding to our having to humble ourselves. In such cases, when our will is strong, in order to better fight the battle between our ego and the will of God, we must persevere in prayer.

We may at first not receive the answer we are looking for, so it may be easy to ignore the voice of the Holy Spirit; however, if we continue in prayer, the message will keep repeating itself and if we call on God for strength, by His grace, we can carry out His will, which is inevitably the better choice. I would also like to point out that just because the intention may be very good, does not mean the action is necessarily pleasing to God. Recall the story of David and building the tabernacle.³

The answer to all our difficulties is always prayer. When we consider the men and

¹ Casein, J. (n.d.). CONFERENCES. Retrieved December 18, 2016, from <http://www.osb.org/lectio/cassian/conf/book1/conf9.html#9.2>

² Prov. 3:5

³ 2 Sam. 7

women of faith throughout the Scriptures, prior to a great transgression, no prayer was made, and the opposite is also true. We must be careful to always seek God's will and never to nurture our ego! We can liken the latter to a man paying close attention to a weed in the middle of his fruit garden. Can you imagine how preposterous it would be if after planting a variety of fruit plants in a garden, the man takes the greatest care in maintaining the growth of the killer weed that will destroy everything he just planted? And not only that, but if anyone comes near that weed to pluck it out – which, although may not be their intention, would greatly benefit him – he flames up in anger and defense! One would surely think such a man to have gone mad.

Abba Agathon said, 'prayer is warfare to the last breath.'⁴ As prayer is our greatest weapon, our enemy will never cease fighting against it and so we often find ourselves weakened and seeking refuge in man or in our own abilities, rather than remaining steadfast in Christ. Still, a monk should never despair for '*though I fall I will rise*'⁵ – 'Do all in your power not to fall, for the strong athlete should not fall. But if you do fall, get up again at once and continue the contest. Even if you fall a thousand times because of the withdrawal of God's grace, rise up again each time, and keep on doing so until the day of your death. For it is written, 'If a righteous man falls seven times' - that is, repeatedly throughout his life - seven times 'shall he rise again' (Prov. 24:16. LXX). So long as you hold fast, with tears and prayer, to the weapon of the monastic habit, you will be counted among those that stand upright, even though you fall again and again.'⁶

Seek refuge in prayer; find strength and comfort in prayer; and most of all persevere in prayer. When a soldier is greatly wounded and taken out of battle, he does not further worsen his wounds before returning to the battlefield but rather seeks the treatment that will give him the strength to return. Often, we worsen our state by becoming lax in our spiritual rule, remembering wrongs, hardening our hearts and other such things as this. This is unwise, my beloved. Imagine a soldier saying, 'I am not in the mood to go to war today, I am depressed, I am going to sleep.' What kind of soldier would he be? Why is it any less unacceptable if this were to come from a monk? Let us become warriors in prayer in times of trial rather than wounded soldiers unable to return to the battlefield in the name of our King.

Prayer will always be accompanied by action (or stillness). Through prayer, the Holy Spirit may call on us to humble ourselves and submit to our brother/sister; in this case, it is not enough to pray about the difficulty of doing so, but one must make the effort to *actually* do so. Likewise, if we see a brother/sister burdened with work, it is not enough to simply say, 'God be with you' or 'May God reward you,' for it is the same as saying, 'May God reward you but not with any help from me!' Saint James tells us, '*If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled," but you do not give them the things which are needed for*

⁴ Ward, B. (1975). Agathon. In *The sayings of the Desert Fathers: the alphabetical collection* (p. 22). Oxford: Mowbrays.

⁵ Micah 7:8

⁶ N., M., Palmer, G. E., Sherrard, P., & K. (1983). St John of Karpathos^[1] For the Encouragement of the Monks in India who had Written to Him One Hundred Texts. In *The Philokalia: the complete text* (Vol. 1, p. 222). Faber & Faber.

*the body, what does it profit? Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.*⁷

My beloved, we do not pray as a routine chore or because that is what is required of us, for we would be nothing more than unprofitable servants⁸ but we do so because it is how we reach the heart of our Lord, it is how we know His will and it is how we remain faithful soldiers.

May we grow in prayer this year and always. May the peace and love of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

Glory be to God forever. Amen.

⁷ Jas. 2:15-17

⁸ Luke 17:10