



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

Monthly Message for the Monastic and Consecrated Servants

February 2017

Dear beloved,

In last month's letter we discussed how prayer is the work of a monk and, by God's grace, in this month's letter I would like us to address one of the means we use in order to do this work.

One of the means we often use to pray is praise. But, what is praise and what is the point of it? Is there a need for all these long hymns and long prayers? Can we not just read everything in our worship and liturgical services and be done in half the time? ... Sure, I suppose that we can. But when we love someone, is this how we behave? Do we want to just get to the point and part ways from them as soon as possible so we can get back to doing whatever seems more important? No, of course not. We can all agree that when we love, we desire to give as much as we can, of ourselves and of our time, to the one we love. So, yes we can just read everything and finish quickly, but thank God, our blessed church does not do this because our blessed church is founded on love.

We, out of our love for God, have left everything behind and have come to serve our Master. We came with the greatest zeal and longing to sacrifice all for Him. We came with joyful and willing hearts. But what happened after our initial zeal "wore out"? We found our love being challenged and, unfortunately, our praise began to suffer as a result of it. We continue to pray, but we do it more as a chore rather than an expression of love. We pray the psalms, in which the words "joy" and "praise" are often repeated, but we feel neither joyful nor praiseful. Sometimes, the expression of our love gets entangled with obstacles and instead of our praise being used as a source of spiritual growth it is turned against us and weakens us in our struggle. We should not permit this to happen.

When we are down, we should find strength in our Lord Jesus Christ, and rise again! Do you imagine that Saints Paul and Silas were in a pleasant situation when they were in prison in Philippi? Were they treated justly? Did people around them show them kindness? I do not think so. However, what did they do? They praised and not only did they praise, but the love in their praise affected the prisoners to the extent that they did not escape when they had the opportunity. What a wonder! Just as we do not realize how we strengthen the entire body of the church when we praise from our souls and hearts, we also do not realize how we weaken the entire body of the church when we give up and settle with feeling down.

If praise were not so powerful, then the devil would not trouble himself with it. This, in

itself, should help us struggle against its warfare and motivate us to remain steadfast. However, we are often deceived and lose our focus and our praises eventually become a burden to us. I believe that there are two reasons why this happens: lack of humility and lack of love.

Do you think that when Saint Paul and Silas were praising, one of the two may have been troubled because the other was off key? Do you think they paused as one of them corrected the other or perhaps one of them may have ceased praising all together because of his frustration with the hymn? Could you imagine if the song of Moses, in the book of Exodus, which we pray every day in the First Canticle of the Midnight Praises, was cut off and a verse stated that the Israelites could not agree with their praises, so they did not continue? How ridiculous would this be! Humility is a great weapon against warfare; use it, my beloved. When you feel that you are about to react in a way that is against the virtue of humility, pray for strength and fight against it with all your might. Stand in praise praying and do not let any thought or action destroy the good work that you are doing.

Love saves us from many of the devil's darts. Realize that if you truly loved those who are standing with you in praise, then joy would be heard in the sound of your praises. If we feel that joy has been removed, then we should also know that we are lacking love towards our brothers/sisters; for surely, if in the midst of your warfare, appeared H.H. Pope Kyrillos to praise with you, your feelings would completely change! The devil will try all means to destroy the presence of love with thoughts of judgment, anger, and hatred; but as disciples of Jesus Christ, we do not permit such impurities to enter into our hearts and we call out to God in praise for mercy and strength to fight our battles.

My beloved, love each other and be humble towards one another. We must realize that God, in His infinite mercy and compassion, gave us the honor of standing before Him in praise. We, therefore, should stand and pray! And fight against the thoughts that divide us from one another. If God has given you the gift of a beautiful voice, is it right to be troubled by your brother/sister who received a different gift? St. Peter said, '*As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God*'¹ not use them against each other. We praise because we love God, not because we love the hymn. This does not mean we cannot love hymns - of course we can and I hope that we do - but what is meant here is that the goal is not the hymn itself, it is love and praise. Praise is a special gift given to us from God. It is our opportunity to stand before Him on this earth and praise Him, just as the angels do in heaven. It is our source of joy and peace. Do not let the devil take that away from you.

*'The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.'*²

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

Glory be to God forever. Amen.

¹ 1 Pet. 4:10

² Matt. 26:41