



## Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

### Monthly Message for the Monastic and Consecrated Servants

April 2017

My beloved children,

As we approach the blessed Feast of the Resurrection, I reflect on the journey we began some weeks ago and I wonder how much each one of us has filled our spiritual storehouse during this period until now. The Great Fast often begins with the sense that the journey we are trekking is going to be a long one and that its end is afar off. However, once we near its close we instead feel that what we thought was going to be a long journey actually ended much quicker than expected; then we find ourselves looking back in regret, wishing we had used our time more wisely and promising ourselves that next year we will be stronger.

My beloved, time is a gift given to us from God and as Saint Isaac the Syrian said, ‘this life has been given to you for repentance; do not waste it in vain pursuits.’<sup>1</sup> It is a fact that a journey, which at one time begins, will also at another time, come to an end. However, when that end will be is not known to any of us. Therefore, we are called to live out every day ‘*worthy of the calling*’<sup>2</sup> so that we may be ‘*preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus*’.<sup>3</sup>

As all other journeys, the monastic journey also has its beginning. The beginning stage of the monastic journey is called the ‘novitiate period,’ a stage in which the novice is given a new name to mark the start of a new life, is referred to as “brother” or “sister,” and joins the community of monastics who have been walking the path before him/her. The main focus of this period is to build a solid foundation, which will then serve to strengthen the novice throughout all his/her stages thereafter. The question is: how does one build this foundation?

In order to build this foundation, the novice must begin the struggle from day one. I do not say that the novice must begin at a certain degree of knowledge or perfection but that he/she must simply *begin*. This means that it does not matter how weak or how strong we are when we first enter the monastic life, but it is not until we accept to renounce our old

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<sup>1</sup> The Syrian, S. (1984). The ascetical homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian. Boston, Mass: The Holy Transfiguration Monastery.

<sup>2</sup> Eph. 4:1

<sup>3</sup> 1 Thess. 5:23

life, long to detach ourselves from our old ways, and willingly go into exile that we can consider ourselves having begun the first day of our struggle.

I refer to it as a struggle because it is just that. Of course, this is also a period of tremendous grace, but if the novice expects to have left the world and all its comforts in order to join a new world and all its comforts and do everything according to his/her will, then he/she is greatly deceived. No matter the background of the novice, one should not expect to enter the monastic life and be treated according to the standards of the world. The only expectation that should be had is to humbly obey so that he/she may be purified by the choices God makes for him/her.

My beloved, be mindful of your ways. When you fall, repent and rise again. Pray that God may grant you the sensitivity to hear the voice of the Holy Spirit so that you may never accept a behavior that is unfitting a Christian, let alone a novice. In my day, a novice was quiet and humble and regarded himself as the servant of all. He did not argue, complain nor make demands but the words “hader” and “akhtet” were always on his lips. He asked for forgiveness if he sinned and obeyed what was asked of him. He did not speak improperly to his brethren, for all who began the struggle before him were his elders and those who came after him were his equals. He was in fact a novice and because he believed himself a beginner, he was able to learn and benefit from everyone.

The start of any journey is very important and we should take care to begin it faithfully. Our faithfulness should be according to the commandments of God and appropriate to our path – if we are called “brother” or “sister” then we should be faithful to our calling. It is a common saying that a monastic has no rights but has duties and if this should be applied throughout the entire life of a monastic, then how much more so as a novice? Strive to be humble and obey so that you may reap the fruits of this most blessed stage and build on a solid foundation.

When we first enter the monastery, we do so with many spiritual illnesses – our pride and our desire for glory and authority, our selfishness and curiosity, our anger and self-will, our jealousy and envy, our gluttony and laziness, our talkativeness and attachment – many of which we may not even know we had. Nevertheless, even if we were to be inflicted with every kind of spiritual illness we can rejoice because if we walk the path faithfully, we have begun the process of healing.

My beloved children, I would like you to also realize that your brothers and sisters have likewise joined the monastery in a similar state but perhaps with illnesses unlike your own, therefore we should be keen to support and love one another and be very aware of the devil who tries to sow division amongst us in order to remove God from our midst. A good reminder to help us with this come from the words of Abba Besarion who said, ‘keep silence and do not compare yourself to others’<sup>4</sup>

The novitiate period is a time of training and learning – a time of solid building and growth. A novice should be immersed in reading monastic books and memorizing the

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<sup>4</sup> Ward, B. (1983). *The sayings of the Desert Fathers: the alphabetical collection*. London: Mowbray.

sayings of the Desert Fathers in order to strive to imitate their virtues and find guidance in difficult times. For instance, if a novice meets a challenge, then he/she can recall that Abba Zacharias said, ‘in my opinion, he is a monk who does violence to himself in everything.’<sup>5</sup> He also threw his garb on the floor, trampled on it and said, ‘the man who does not let himself be treated thus, cannot be a monk.’<sup>6</sup> Continually reading such words helps remind us that our forefathers struggled daily to imitate our Lord Jesus Christ in the virtue of humility and will encourage us to behave in the same manner.

Furthermore, a novice should learn to grow and remain in his/her cell, for although this may not be something intuitive at first, through patience and depth in prayer, the novice will eventually feel as a ‘fish out of water’<sup>7</sup> when outside his/her cell for too long. One can say that the community helps to diagnose the monk of his illnesses and the cell is where he will find his cure, for as said by Abba Moses, ‘Go, sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything.’<sup>8</sup>

I have mentioned only a few things, which must be learned during the first stage of monasticism in order to build a solid foundation – the novice himself/herself should be eager to ask for guidance before taking on any action. The fathers warn us that there is great danger in following one’s will and Abba Anthony said, ‘if he is able to, a monk ought to tell his elders confidently how many steps he takes and how many drops of water he drinks in his ell, in case he is in error about it.’<sup>9</sup>

We should never forget that it is only by God’s grace that we were taken out of the world and we should always faithfully struggle forward – ‘*Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me.*’<sup>10</sup>

My beloved, if we desire to be healed, we should strive to build ourselves daily according to the monastic vows and accept all that comes to us, with thanksgiving, because it is only through tribulations that we are healed. Otherwise, if we complain and grumble, then it is fair to say that we do not desire to be purified, but rather that we simply like the exterior look and way of life of the monastic, but have no desire to make any progress or changes internally. Remember that it is said, ‘*Not everyone who says to Me, “Lord, Lord,” shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven.*’<sup>11</sup>

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

Glory be to God forever. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Ward, B. (1983). *The sayings of the Desert Fathers: the alphabetical collection*. London: Mowbray.

<sup>6</sup> Ward, B. (1983). *The sayings of the Desert Fathers: the alphabetical collection*. London: Mowbray.

<sup>7</sup> Ward, B. (1983). *The sayings of the Desert Fathers: the alphabetical collection*. London: Mowbray.

<sup>8</sup> Ward, B. (1983). *The sayings of the Desert Fathers: the alphabetical collection*. London: Mowbray.

<sup>9</sup> Ward, B. (1983). *The sayings of the Desert Fathers: the alphabetical collection*. London: Mowbray.

<sup>10</sup> Phil. 3:12

<sup>11</sup> Matt. 7:21