



Coptic Orthodox

Diocese of the Southern

United States

Monthly Message for the Monastic and Consecrated Servants

June 2017

My beloved children,

Let me share with you a little secret: nothing in this whole world makes me happier than seeing you love God and love one another. Nothing. When a Pharisee asked our Lord Jesus Christ, “*which is the great commandment in the law?*” Jesus said to him, ‘*You shall Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.*’ This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: ‘*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets”¹ And although we know that if we say, ‘I love God’ and hate our brother/sister, the truth is not in us² still, we may wonder why this is the case. For it seems fairly easy to be able to love a perfect and loving God and only normal to feel contempt towards our difficult and sinful brother/sister; so then why can we not claim to love God if, in our hearts, we do not feel love towards our brother/sister? And what does it mean to love my neighbor as myself? Let us answer these questions by addressing three points.

First, when our Lord Jesus Christ said: ‘*Abide in Me, and I in You.*’ He also said: ‘*As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me.*’³ Saint Augustine spoke of how the branch provides no direct benefit to the root, but receives nourishment from the root in order to flourish as it is designed to.⁴ We waste time attempting to derive virtue through our own efforts through means other than God. St. Maximus the Confessor said: “The Lord told us, ‘Outside from me you can do nothing,’ This is because our weakness, when moved to do good things, is unable to bring anything to completion without the giver of good things.”⁵ Our desires and our efforts should be invested in Christ, for in everything else when we give we lose – we may lose time, we may lose energy, we may even lose our peace – for in such cases, we are branches cut off from the root trying arduously to bear fruit anyway. However, in Christ, the more

¹ Matt. 22:36-40

² 1 John 4:20

³ John 15:4

⁴ Sheridan, M. (. (2000). *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*. Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity Press.

⁵ Sheridan, M. (. (2000). *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*. Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity Press.

we expend, the more we are filled. There is never loss in Christ. Thus the beginning of everything is always in Christ – if we do not love our brother/sister it is because we do not abide in love and if we do not abide in love it is because we do not abide in God, because God is love.⁶

Secondly, our Lord Jesus Christ said: *‘If you love Me, keep My commandments.’*⁷ Can we therefore say that we love God if we do not love each other? *‘Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law.’*⁸ For this reason also the desert fathers always instructed their disciples to begin with this foundation of love. *‘In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother.’*⁹ St. Anthony said: *‘Our life and our death is with our neighbor. If we gain our brother, we have gained God, but if we scandalize our brother, we have sinned against Christ’*¹⁰ We must realize the magnitude of the consequence when we make no great effort to rid ourselves of the bitterness in our hearts towards one another – *‘We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death. Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.’*¹¹ But he who keeps His word shall live forever.¹²

Thirdly, why do you think God asked us to love our neighbor as ourselves and did not use any other association? I wonder if it is because of the great care we take of ourselves. When it comes to our sins we are gentle with ourselves, we make excuses for ourselves, and we hope to be forgiven. We do not make a public display of our weaknesses and we often lookout for what is in our best interest. We like to please ourselves, to be comfortable, and to be happy. We like to be served, honored, and complimented; we do not like to be judged and spoken negatively about and we desire to be apologized to when offended. Perhaps it is for this reason that God asked us to love others as we love ourselves. I would also like to point out one another thing – our Lord Jesus Christ said: *‘Therefore whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.’*¹³ Notice that it was not said, *‘whatever man does to you, do to him,’* but rather what you would like done to you, do also unto others.

If we abide in God, we will be filled with love as St. Augustine said: *‘Love is so much the gift from God that it is called God.’*¹⁴ If we abide in Him, we will know Him and we will overflow with love for one another, for *‘He who does not love does not know God, for God*

⁶ Sheridan, M. (. (2000). Ancient Christian Commenatry on Scripture. Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity Press.

⁷ John 14:15

⁸ Rom. 13:8

⁹ 1 John 3:10

¹⁰ Ward, B. (1983). The sayings of the Desert Fathers: the alphabetical collection. London: Mowbray.

¹¹ 1 John 3:14-15

¹² John 8:51

¹³ Matt. 7:12

¹⁴ Sheridan, M. (. (2000). Ancient Christian Commenatry on Scripture. Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity Press.

*is love.*¹⁵ And if we love one another, we will look to our brother/sister's welfare and look to our own sins, for as the Desert Fathers say: 'When someone is occupied with his own faults, he does not see those of his neighbor.'¹⁶ This is our life's work, my beloved – not any other thing – so, I urge you to beware of distractions that may seem to be important but are not working towards your salvation. "A monk once came to Basil of Casearea and said, 'Speak a word, Father'; and Basil replied, 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart'; and the monk went away at once. Twenty years later he came back and said, 'Father, I have struggled to keep your word; now speak another word to me'; and he said, 'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself; and the monk returned in obedience to his cell to keep that also.'¹⁷

My beloved children, I am overjoyed when I see that God is in your midst and that you have love for one another. I am overjoyed when, instead of complaints and disputes, I hear you making excuses for one another, forgiving one another, and looking out for the interests of your brother/sister before your own – 'Whenever you hear an old man praising his neighbor more than himself, it is because he has reached a great stature; for this is perfection to praise one's neighbor more than oneself.'¹⁸ In Saint Bishoy's story, it was not the monk who looked out for himself who was given the grace of seeing our Lord Jesus Christ, but it was the one who looked out for another. Where in the Synaxarion is there is a story of an angel of the Lord coming to a saint and saying: 'Your talents have been accepted and God has sent me to bless you'? Is it innovative ideas, talents, leadership skills, great ascetic practices and such things as this that make a father proud? Or is it love for God, humility and love for one another? Remember that it is said, '*Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.*'¹⁹ May the Lord grant us wisdom, humility and the great gift of love.

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

Glory be to God forever. Amen.

¹⁵ 1 John 4:8

¹⁶ Ward, B. (1983). The sayings of the Desert Fathers: the alphabetical collection. London: Mowbray.

¹⁷ Ward, B. (1983). The sayings of the Desert Fathers: the alphabetical collection. London: Mowbray.

¹⁸ Ward, B. (1983). The sayings of the Desert Fathers: the alphabetical collection. London: Mowbray.

¹⁹ 1 Cor. 13:1-3