



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

Monthly Message for the Monastic and Consecrated Servants

September 2017

To my sons and daughters,

Peace and grace.

If we were to open a more ‘ascetic’ branch in the monastery/convent where everyone had the option to join, would you? Those who joined would do so out of their own will and would live amongst the community as they do now, but the difference would be the level of self-denial. Let me elaborate ---

It was said of the monks of old that they “went without sleep because they were watching for the Lord; they did not speak because they were listening to God; they fasted because they were fed by the Word of God.” So this new branch would be a true path of self-denial. Amongst other things, here one would fight against laziness and serve others with all fervor, one would fight against the urge to constantly make jokes, argue, and voice opinions, and one would deny themselves when fasting and be simple and moderate when eating. “The cell was of central importance in their asceticism. ‘Sit in your cell and it will teach you everything’ they said. The point was that unless a man could find God *here*, in this one place, his cell, he would not find him by going somewhere else. But they had no illusions about what it meant to stay in the cell: it meant to stay there in mind as well as in body. To stay there in body, but to think about the outside world, was already to have left it.”¹

However, as we have mentioned many times, doing such things only outwardly will eventually deceive us for “It was the end that mattered, the ascetic practices were only a means.”² This new branch would be motivated by internal watchfulness not only by following an external set of rules. What is the difference?

When we are only following rules because we are told to follow them, we can appear to be obedient but inwardly something very different may be happening. When referring to silence that pretends to be patient but is actually meant to excite anger in the brethren, John Cassian said: “As if in the sight of God mere words, and not mainly the will was called to

¹ *The sayings of the Desert Fathers: the alphabetical collection*, Ward, B., trans. (London: Mowbray: Cistercian Publications, 1983), Foreword.

² *The sayings of the Desert Fathers: the alphabetical collection*, Ward, B., trans. (London: Mowbray: Cistercian Publications, 1983), Foreword.

fault, and as if only the actual deed of sin, and not also the wish and purpose, was reckoned as wrong; or as if it would be asked in the judgment only what each one had done and not what he also purposed to do.”³ Here we outwardly see a virtue of silence, but inwardly the intention of the brother is to express rebellion and incite anger in others. God is the judge.

External self-denial leads to an internal self-denial, which leads to humility, which leads to God. They are all steps in a ladder. This month last year, we discussed the fourteenth step in the *Ladder of Divine Ascent* and noted that the monk who honestly denies himself when it comes to food, is likely to also deny himself when it comes to his will in relation to the community. Perhaps the monk who lives a true ascetic life will not seek a certain status or to be in charge of any certain obedience in the monastery/convent, will accept blame and not have bitter feelings towards others, will apologize when wrong or when reproached even if not in the wrong, will be humble and submit to the rules that war against the ego.

It seems rather strange to suggest a more ascetic branch in a place that is supposed to be all ascetic, but the truth is that the reality of the ascetic has changed. The monastics before us sought austere lives, but we seek a certain comfort now and only deny ourselves to the extent that we desire. The monastics before us considered insult as praise, but if we are humiliated, our reaction is to rebel and demand our rights. The monastics before us took blame for all things, but if we are reproached, our reaction is to defend ourselves. The monastics before us were humble, obedient and submissive, but if we are given advice by our brethren/sisters, our reaction is to belittle the one speaking to us. If our living conditions are not as we expect, we complain. If the food is not good, we complain. If we are asked to work when we do not want to, we complain. Things are much different now.

My beloved sons and daughters, I ask you: would you like to join a life of asceticism and climb with me the ladder that will teach us to be humble like our Creator and live a true life of praise and worship? We are not called to be perfect immediately but we are called to a life of repentance and so when we find that we have fallen prey to our ego, let us not accept it! “Make the effort, however little, and the Lord will quickly come to help you.”⁴ There is no need to give examples here, we each know when we have yielded to our ego, and so when this happens let us be quick to humble ourselves and God’s grace will help us grow and be victorious in our ascetic struggle.

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

Glory be to God forever. Amen.

³ *John Cassian: The Conferences*, Cassian, J., Ramsey, B., trans. (New York: New York, The Newman Press, 1997), 568.

⁴ *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Climacus, J. (New York: Paulist Press, 1982). 168.