



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

Monthly Message for the Monastic and Consecrated Servants

October 2017

My beloved children,

In the world we encourage a curious mind – it improves memory and understanding and broadens our knowledge. However, in the monastic life it is encouraged only when it is directed towards God. Our curiosity in longing to understand our Creator leads us to searching the Scriptures which in turn leads to desiring to understand the Scriptures, which then, by God’s grace, branches out into desiring to grow in worship and praise. It is an endless journey of love and suffering bringing us closer to our Beloved. However, when we begin to be curious about affairs that are neither within the scope of our assigned obedience nor in any way beneficial to our spiritual growth, we lose sight of the goal and we are now running on a new track of distractions. Curiosity in matters that do not concern us can lead to several negative things such as being distracted from our sole purpose here, having judgmental thoughts, and pride.

Imagine that you are an Olympic runner; you have trained for a long time for the day of your competition and now you are physically ready and know exactly how to keep your eye on the goal. Now let us say that on the day of the competition you begin to focus your thoughts on another runner who is assigned to run two lanes away from you (notice here that you have already begun to be distracted even before the race). A few hours later you go out onto the track, ready to run the race you have been training for all these years. The starting pistol is sounded and you begin running. You are leading the race and everything is looking good. Then the thoughts start coming: “where is the other runner? How far is s/he behind me? Am I running fast enough? Will s/he overtake me?” Unfortunately, the thoughts cause you to slow down and so becoming nervous you turn your eyes in order to see where the other runner is. Then what do you expect happens next? You run off your path and collide with the runner next to you. You lost sight of the goal and have fallen.

Of course in the monastic life we are not meant to compete against one another and actually the one who has fallen should find their brother/sister by their side helping them back up – the real competition for both the true athlete and the spiritual one is internal. The goal is to be the best in relation to God, not in comparison to your brother/sister. Nevertheless distraction is a set back. Be it jealousy or any other form of insecurity, if we do not battle this war internally with the help of God, we will externalize it and find it manifested in our actions until we finally lose sight of the goal.

“But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people’s matters” (1 Pet. 4:15). In a letter to St. Barsanuphius from a brother who felt afflicted in his relationship with his abbot thinking that he is discriminating between him and the other brothers, St. Barsanuphius replied the following: “Brother, you are tempting yourself. Do you not know that one is tempted by one’s own desire, being enticed by it? Pay attention to yourself; for the devil has hurriedly sought to disturb you from the advice you have received. May God not grant him room to do so. The Lord said to Peter: Listen! Satan has demanded you, to sift you all like wheat, but I have prayed to my Father that your own faith may not fail. Brother, do not pay attention to anyone else but yourself. And do not be curious; for it will be of no benefit to you at all. It is for nothing that Satan has so troubled your heart. See that you do not render vain my prayer for you to God. Had you not even come at this time, I would still declare these things to you. You have sinned; stay calm, and do not think of evil things but only of good things. For a good person thinks about good things, while an evil person thinks about evil things. The Lord will forgive you. Get back up again, supported by the hand of God, and do not trust your thoughts. The demons present matters to you as they want. Guard yourself from them; for they are fearful and rage against you. The Lord will abolish them from you swiftly, brother. Amen.”¹ Here, the monk’s curiosity got the better of him and making judgments, he eventually reached the troubling stage of feeling “scandalized” – as the famous saying of our beloved Pope Shenouda III, of the thrice-blessed memory, goes, “It is none of my business, let me keep to myself.” And this, my beloved, will save you from a multitude of sins.

Often times we think we are entitled to certain information or we believe that the more information we have, the more important we are (also meaning the less we know, the less important we are). We can easily fall into pride through curiosity by simple things like asking questions that are not necessary and developing opinions about the information we now know. Listening in to a conversation that does not involve us, turning our eyes towards a matter that does not concern us... all such things are rooted in pride. Maybe it takes a little humility to accept that there are certain things that we do not need to know. Of course if it is our responsibility, then it is a different matter, but if it is not, then why do we feel the need to know – “For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2).

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

Glory be to God forever. Amen.

¹ Barsanuphius and John. *Barsanuphius and John*. John Chryssavgis, Trans. (D.C.: Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2006), Letter 235.