



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

Monthly Message for the Monastic and Consecrated Servants

December 2017

Dear beloved,

Peace and grace.

This month last year I wrote to you about being leaders in your spiritual lives and we discussed certain characteristics of such a leader. This month I would like to add to this by mentioning a point about the virtue of silence and I would like us to conclude by reflecting on what our silence communicates to others.

In Proverbs we read: “In the multitude of words sin is not lacking, but he who restrains his lips is wise” (Prov. 10:19). The one who is poor in spirit does not talk a lot but rather keeps himself still in order to hear the voice of God. We should consider our holy mother St. Mary and how many of her words were recorded in the Bible. Being the mother of God, we would assume that she would have the most to say from all others but, as we know, St. Mary was unknown in her generation and kept the secrets of her heart between her and God alone; in turn God granted her the greatest gift and today the whole world learns from our blessed Mother.

In the monastery, we can sometimes do the opposite. Instead of keeping silent and waiting on the Lord, we feel that the more we express ourselves, the more we gain. When the desire for honor lurks in our hearts, this is reflected in our speech – we are constantly sharing our opinion, making requests, suggesting changes, being curious in matters that do not concern us... However we forget that it was St. Mary’s silence that granted her to be honored above even the Cherubim and Seraphim, not her words – “How can you believe, who receive honor from one another, and do not seek the honor that comes from the only God?” (John 5:44).

“When the door of the steam baths is continually left open, the heat inside rapidly escapes through it; likewise the soul, in its desire to say many things, dissipates its remembrance of God through the door of speech, **even though everything it says may be good**. Thereafter the intellect, though lacking appropriate ideas, pours out a welter of confused thoughts to anyone it meets, as it no longer has the Holy Spirit to keep its understanding free from fantasy. Ideas of value always shun verbosity, being foreign to confusion and fantasy. **Timely silence**, then, is precious, for it is nothing less than the mother of the wisest thoughts.¹

¹ *The Philokalia*. St Diadochos of Photiki. On Spiritual Knowledge and Discrimination. One Hundred Texts. In N. T. Hagiorite, M. O. Corinth, G. Palmer, P. Sherrard, & K. Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), p. 193

Notice that the elder mentioned “timely silence” and not just silence – a silence that has meaning and purpose. Therefore let us ask ourselves this question: what does my silence speak to others? When asked to share a word with an archbishop, Abba Pambo said, “If he is not edified by my silence, he will not be edified by my speech.”² Here I imagine that the elder did not simply mean that silence is always more edifying than words, but that he himself was a living example of the words that may have benefited his guest and therefore words were not necessary. As the Apostle James mentioned, sometimes we only want to hear words of advice and consolation but we are far from being ready to apply these words in practical ways in our lives. The same can also be true when it comes to sharing words with others – we are ready to give the best sermons and strongest advice but when it comes time for us to practice what we preach we make a thousand excuses for ourselves.

So let us ask ourselves: does my silence edify others? Is it filled with love for my neighbor and gentleness in my actions? Or am I only silent when I am troubled and therefore my distance from others gives off the feeling of being cold? Am I a good example to others? Is my silence filled with praise and prayers and therefore creates peace or is it filled with murmurings and complaints and therefore creates an environment of tension and sadness? Am I silently judging others and running away from serving them? ... What does my silence speak to others?

During this fast, I would like for all of us to benefit from the grace that God has given us to be living and serving in the monastery. Throughout our day, let us remember the Lord in our silence instead of allowing distracting thoughts to rob us of our quiet time. Let us rekindle the stillness of our cell life and hear God’s voice speaking to our hearts.

May God grant all of us the gift of conversing with Him and to be submissive to His will.

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

Glory be to God forever. Amen.

² *The sayings of the Desert Fathers: the alphabetical collection*, Ward, B., trans. (London: Mowbray: Cistercian Publications, 1983), p.81.

PSALM 118 – A commentary by St. Theophan The Recluse

A monastic journey through Psalm 118.....

THE FIRST OCTAVE (VERSES 1 – 8)

VERSE 1 – *Blessed are the blameless in the way, who walk in the law of the Lord.*

Happiness:

If only we could run that we may obtain (1 Cor 9:24). What then prevents it? Why have we stopped? An indescribable happiness is promised. Who does not desire happiness? And we sinners, lovers of sin, why do we love sin? Because in it we hope to find happiness! And although we are deceived, and instead of happiness find anguish and torment, we keep wallowing in it, for who knows, one day we might be happy? And so we go on and on, as if expecting figs from a thistle plant.

30. St. Theophan The Recluse

All want happiness, but not all know how to find it. The words blessed are the blameless seem to be saying: I know what you want; you want blessedness; well, if you want to be blessed, be without blame.

- St. Augustine

Narrow path:

It is true that this way is difficult and full of danger. The way of the commandments itself is pure. But those who walk on it are doing so under a continuous spatter of mud. When it hits, it does not stay on the surface, but penetrates deep inside and cannot be washed away, but has to be either cut or burned out. St. Macarius describes it as a road through thorns and quagmires, with poisonous reptiles and wild animals lying in hiding, with spears and swords projecting out of the ground. How much care, effort, work and struggle does this require! For this reason, the word 'blameless' in the original is the same as that used to describe lambs set aside for the paschal sacrifice. This indicates that those entering the way of the commandments in order to achieve blamelessness must condemn themselves for the slaughter. Only one who at the start decides to consider himself as one dead shall be able to withstand all temptations and difficulties; for what can be unbearable for one already dead? All this is less than death. This is what the Lord meant by the words: If any will come after Me, let him deny himself (Mt 16:24).

But what about fulfilling our obligations some of the time, but other times not? Wouldn't that be easier? Nothing would come of acting along these lines. This would be like building and destroying. There is but one thing to do: you've started so go!

- St. Theophan the Recluse

He who walks blamelessness, he does not deviate either to the right or to the left; he does not look around, he does not stand still, as if waiting for something, but moves ahead, "forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before...directing his way towards a known destination, for the prize of the high calling" (Phil 3:13,14).

- Theodoret