



## **Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States**

### **Monthly Message for the Monastic and Consecrated Servants**

**January 2018**

Dear beloved,

Peace and grace.

In our recent November letter, we began to discuss the three vows, which we are bound to live by in the monastery and to which we will have to answer for before the judgment seat of God. We discussed the importance of the vow of obedience in the monastic community – without obedience, it would be difficult to live in harmony and difficult to maintain a foundation, for various opinions would cause constant change and stability and growth would be lacking in each monastic and in the monastery as a whole – and this month, I would like us to continue with the same topic and discuss the vow of poverty and its relevance in the monastic community.

Our Lord Jesus Christ said, “if you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come and follow Me.” (Matt. 19:21). And so we did. We have left all and followed Him. But why can we not bring with us part of our earnings? Could we not use some of it to donate to the monastery or to take care of our personal needs? Why is it so important that we should first leave all behind and take the vow of poverty?

Recall the story of the brother who kept a part of his goods and went to the desert to be a monk: “A brother renounced the world and gave his goods to the poor, but he kept back a little for his personal expenses. He went to see Abba Anthony. When he told him this, the old man said to him, 'If you want to be a monk, go into the village, buy some meat, cover your naked body with it and come here like that.' The brother did so, and the dogs and birds tore at his flesh. When he came back the old man asked him whether he had followed his advice. He showed him his wounded body, and Saint Anthony said, 'Those who renounce the world but want to keep something for themselves are torn in this way by the demons who make war on them.’”<sup>1</sup> Therefore the monk who lives this way – having only left the world physically but not internally, in body but not in soul, will find himself alive to the world and will be greatly stumbled in his growth of self-denial and humility – two virtues which lead us to dying to the self.

Our voluntary poverty is not only of material goods, but also of all that we possess – it is

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<sup>1</sup> *The sayings of the Desert Fathers: the alphabetical collection*, Ward, B., trans. (London: Mowbray: Cistercian Publications, 1983), p.5.

poverty of our will. We have followed our Lord Jesus Christ as the poorest of the poor, owning nothing and have completely abandoned ourselves to the mercy of our Master. If indeed we have truly done this, then our life in the monastery will be filled with blessings for through our poverty we will become rich in Christ. We, owning no opinion, no self-will, will humbly obey His word and therefore will be obedient to one another. It will be easy to say “hader” and “I’ve sinned, forgive me”, for within us, we will possess nothing for which to fight for. A rich man guards his possessions and defends his honor, but a poor man accepts all that comes his way.

Know, my beloved, that a monastic perfectly abiding by the vow of poverty would never challenge a rule in the monastery by suggesting something other than what has been already decided, would never refuse to work, would never argue, would never disregard the advice of those entrusted to guide. If we always challenge the words of the Abbot or the administration of the monastery, then where is our poverty? There is ownership in such behavior. If we are always offering a different opinion, or making suggestions based on our own comfort and desires, then we have not died to the world but have merely changed our address and clothing. This is not death to the world but just a new lifestyle. Taking the vows lightly is damaging to the growth of the monastic and to the monastery for the vows are tools leading us to the complete denial of our will and if we die to ourselves then we can truly live purely for the will and glory of God. Ask yourselves, my beloved: have I just changed my clothes or have I changed my life? Woe to the monk who refuses to live by the vows and renounce his will!

John Cassian, referring to the vice of avarice, said the following: “We should therefore make every effort to cut out from our souls this root of all evils, avarice, in the certain knowledge that if the root remains the branches will sprout freely. This uprooting is difficult to achieve unless we are living in a monastery, for in a monastery we cease to worry about even our most basic needs. With the fate of Ananias and Sapphira in mind, we should shudder at the thought of keeping to ourselves anything of our former possessions.”<sup>2</sup> Two things are important to highlight here – the first is that it is said that only those living in the monastery have hope to escape the vice of avarice for we are meant to cease even worrying about *our most basic needs* and the second is that these former possessions, are not only financial but are also our social status, our comforts, our hedonistic desires... for as John Cassian said, if we do not make a conscious effort to let these go, eventually these roots will sprout branches and we will find ourselves deeply entangled in the sin of pride, living for ourselves without even realizing.

The three vows – obedience, poverty, and chastity – are the roots of our growth. It is through faithfully living out these three vows that we may fight all other temptations. In the *Philokalia*, Evagrius the Solitary, referring to the Temptation on the Mount, says: “Of the demons opposing us in the practice of the ascetic life, there are three groups who fight in the front line: those entrusted with the appetites of gluttony, those who suggest avaricious thoughts, and those who incite us to seek the esteem of men. All the other demons follow behind and in their turn attack those already wounded by the first three groups. For one does not fall into the power of the demon of unchastity, unless one has first fallen because of gluttony; nor is one’s anger aroused unless one is fighting for food or material possessions or the esteem of men. [...] Nor will one escape pride, the first

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<sup>2</sup> *The Philokalia*. St. John Cassian. On the Eight Vices. Avarice. In N. T. Hagiorite, M. O. Corinth, G. Palmer, P. Sherrard, & K. Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), V1 p. 82.

offspring of the devil, unless one has banished avarice, the root of all evil, since poverty makes a man humble, according to Solomon (cf. Prov. 10:4. LXX). In short, no one can fall into the power of any demon, unless he has been wounded by those of the front line.”<sup>3</sup>

May the Lord grant us the grace to live out the truth of our calling, carry our crosses and renounce our will. 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>3</sup> *The Philokalia*. Evagrius the Solitary. Texts on Discrimination in Respect of Passions and Thoughts. In N. T. Hagiorite, M. O. Corinth, G. Palmer, P. Sherrard, & K. Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), V1 p. 38.

## PSALM 118 – A commentary by St. Theophan The Recluse

A monastic journey through Psalm 118.....

### THE FIRST OCTAVE (VERSES 1 – 8)

**VERSE 2:** *Blessed are they that search out His testimonies; with their whole heart shall they seek after Him*

Truly blessed of all those who search the testimonies of God are those who by their very actions search all that is mentioned in the word of God. And those beginning to follow the word of God are not immediately led into spiritual experiences. At this time they are not ready for it, for there is yet too much noise and disarray in their souls and hearts. In time, however, when the emotions quiet down, spiritual experience will begin, from small occurrences to great ones. The further they continue, the more they experience, until finally they acquire senses exercised to discern both good and evil (Heb 5:14). The object of seeking for the Lord, however, is not just to seek and seek – but rather to seek in order to find; and having found Him, to remain with Him and in Him, possessing Him and being possessed by Him.

- St. Theophan the Recluse

**VERSE 4:** *Thou hast enjoined Thy commandments, that we should keep them most diligently.*

#### Diligence:

We are not to act with a distracted mind and careless heart in the realm of the commandments, but with our whole heart, with full attention, diligence, and care are we to fulfill God's commandments, with reverence for Him who gave them.

- Theodoret

#### Negligence:

If, however we will observe them with a negligent heart and a mind occupied with other thoughts, then we will fulfill our obligation only outwardly, with the members of our body only.

- St. Hilary

We sin most of all in this respect through heartlessness. Our deeds are correct, but they are without heart and often without soul. When making a prostration, in your heart also fall with reverence before the All-seeing and Omnipotent One. In giving alms, do it with a heart directed towards Him Who is ready to accept it invisibly. In forgiving an insult, do it as if it were a penance sent by God that will petition forgiveness for yourself. Thus, in everything, in all our deeds, there should be present a genuine internal good disposition, which is what gives external actions their value.

- St. Theophan the Recluse

#### Routine:

Our great misfortune is that anything we do becomes routine. After repeated

participation of the heart in doing one and the same thing, it grows indifferent. Thoughts begin to wander, and whatever is done is done formally. What is to be done? There is no other remedy apart from laying down a rule for yourself: always consider that you are just beginning, without thinking you have done anything previously. Everything you do, do it as if it were for the first time.

- St. Theophan the Recluse