



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

Monthly Message for the Monastic and Consecrated Servants

February 2018

My dear children,

This month let us continue with our discussion on the three vows and conclude with the one remaining — the vow of chastity. The vow of chastity, as is the case with the other two vows, is multifaceted — going far beyond that of just physical purity. I believe that we are not only called to be physically chaste, but that we are also called to have a chaste mind, a chaste tongue, and a chaste heart.

They often say that a monk is a thought — meaning that our battles are with our thoughts and not with each other nor with our external circumstances. There is a famous saying that our perception is our reality and therefore it is only how we interpret things that will make the difference in our reactions and growing experiences, and not the actual event itself. What freedom we would have if we kept our minds free of any troubling thoughts that distract us from the kingdom of God! It was said of Abba Agathon that “Whenever his thoughts urged him to pass judgment on something which he saw, he would say to himself ‘Agathon, it is not your business to do that.’”¹ And when St. John the Short was publicly insulted by one of his brothers, he responded by saying, “That is very true, abba; and you have said that when you only see the outside, but if you were able to see the inside, too, what would you say then?”² We can go on sharing hundreds of similar stories of those great humble, strugglers who battled with their thoughts, but it suffices to say that as good soldiers of Jesus Christ we are called to forever ward off thoughts that stain our conscious and have destructive rippling effects. For what benefit is it to us to keep reliving a negative thought? Have you ever benefited from such a thing? Even more harmful would be if we are mistaken in what we are thinking — Abba Elias said, “observe your thoughts, and beware of what you have in your heart and your spirit, knowing that the demons put ideas into you so as to corrupt your soul by making it think of that which is not right, in order to turn your spirit from the consideration of your sins and of God.”³ There are many blessings to be attained from taking blame, making excuses for our brethren, and forgiving others but there are no blessings to receive in accepting bad thoughts.

¹ *The sayings of the Desert Fathers: the alphabetical collection*, Ward, B., trans. (Kalamazoo: MI: Cistercian Publications, 1975), p.23.

² *The sayings of the Desert Fathers: the alphabetical collection*, Ward, B., trans. (Kalamazoo: MI: Cistercian Publications, 1975), p.87.

³ *The sayings of the Desert Fathers: the alphabetical collection*, Ward, B., trans. (Kalamazoo: MI: Cistercian Publications, 1975), p.71.

Furthermore, keeping the chastity of our tongue is not just the obvious ceasing from gossiping but it is also controlling ourselves from idle chatter. In the book of Proverbs we read: “He who covers a transgression seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates friends.” (Prov. 17:9) which is one of the unfortunate results of gossip. We greatly displease God when we speak ill of one another. Listed as one of the things God hates is, “one who sows discord among brethren” (Prov. 6:19). However, it does not stop there. We also have to remember that our lives have been consecrated to God and dedicated to praise and worship; thus when we, too often, spend idle time speaking with one another we can forget our goal and step over boundaries into familiarity, which we are warned against. “Abba Poemen said that a brother asked Abba Simon, 'If I come out of my cell and find my brother amusing himself, I amuse myself with him and if I find him in the act of laughing, I laugh with him. Then when I return to my cell, I am no longer at peace.' The old man said to him, 'So, when you come out of your cell and find people laughing or talking you want to laugh and talk with them, and when you return to your cell, you expect to find yourself as you were before?' The brother said, 'What should I do?' The old man replied, 'Be watchful inwardly; be watchful outwardly.’”⁴

Lastly and most importantly, we must keep the chastity of our hearts. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”(Matt. 5:8). For they shall... see God! What is there to say then, for those of us who allow impurities to so easily enter and take residence in our hearts? My children resist to bloodshed, striving against sin (Heb. 12:4)! Our heart is our treasury and so by keeping our hearts pure, our thoughts and our words will not betray us, for “out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matt. 12:34) and “In the multitude of words sin is not lacking, but he who restrains his lips is wise” (Prov. 10:19). It is not without reason that the monks of old often spoke of purity of heart, of guarding our thoughts and of keeping silent. From their vast experience, they knew very well the secrets of life. “Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life” (Prov. 4:23). Within this treasury [our hearts] we hold the kingdom of heaven. If we take such good care of our electronics, how much more the kingdom of heaven within our hearts? We must never forget this and we must pray for the grace to fight and be every so watchful to keep the chastity of our hearts.

I pray that the beginning of your new year has begun strong and that you are continuing to grow daily, learning from every good and difficult experience you encounter. I pray for each one of you that God may confirm you in your calling and grant you a life of faithfulness to the commandments and to your vows — the backbone of our chosen path. When we keep the remembrance of our vows always before us, by God’s grace, we remain firm and steadfast no matter how often we stumble.

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

Glory be to God forever. Amen.

⁴ *The sayings of the Desert Fathers: the alphabetical collection*, Ward, B., trans. (Kalamazoo: MI: Cistercian Publications, 1975), p.186.