



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

Monthly Message for the Monastic and Consecrated Servants

April 2018

My dear sons and daughters,

Christ is Risen! I wish all of you a blessed Feast of the Resurrection and pray always that these joyous fifty days are being spent, in the same spirit and strength, as did the Great Fast and blessed Holy Week. I pray for this yes, but I also consider in my prayer that this may not be the case for all of us. Some of us may find that, although we are expressing it verbally and although the church is celebrating the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, internally we may not find that we are in the same spirit but rather that we are still in the tomb waiting to be risen from the death of spiritual dryness.

So then what do we do when we discover that we have not risen with the risen One? Although we are aware that this time of desolation is our time of perseverance and spiritual growth, we may not know how to cope with it. Do we retreat and cease all spiritual exercises? Do we seek to change our environment? What is the solution? I cannot answer this question for you with a simple formula because each one of us has their own struggle and God purifies and perfects each one of us in His own way, however I can suggest three things we can do during this time: first, to call on our Savior to save us and to protect us from sin; next, not to give in to negligence and laziness but to continue to be faithful in our duties; and finally to wait on the Lord.

“But when he saw that the wind was boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink he cried out, saying, ‘Lord, save me!’ (Matt. 14:30). In this story, St. Peter first began with a zealous spirit and courageously asked our Lord Jesus Christ to command him to come to Him on the water. Everything seemed fine at first until the external circumstances changed and things got a little complicated. Then what happened? As we know, fear and doubt entered St. Peter’s heart and he began to sink — much like us in times of trial. We panic and react in sometimes destructive ways. However, the beauty of this story is St. Peter’s reliance on our Lord in the midst of the storm. As soon as St. Peter began to sink he cried out for help and “immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and caught him” (Matt. 14:31). This is what I love very much about our beloved St. Peter — although we have been permitted to know of some of his weaknesses, I do not think it is so we can understand that even he has frailties, but it is so that we can learn that his eye was always on his Master and so if he fell, he was able to say with confidence: “Do not rejoice over me, my enemy; When I fall, I will arise; When I sit in darkness, the Lord will be a light to me” (Mic. 7:8).

Having our guard down during times of spiritual dryness may cause us to sin against our brethren and to become neglectful towards our duties. Here we fall in the great danger of following our own will. Once the demons find us willing to take our 'own' good advice, then we are easily attacked. It is then that we begin to miss mandatory prayers, to remain in our cells when we have a responsibility outside our cells to complete a task, to fall into pride and refuse to obey our elders. John Cassian said, "Our sixth struggle is against the demon of listlessness, who works hand in hand with the demon of dejection. This is a harsh, terrible demon, always attacking the monk, falling upon him at the sixth hour (mid-day), making him slack and fall of fear, inspiring him with hatred for his monastery, his fellow monks, for work of any kind, and even for the reading of Holy Scripture. [...] Then he makes him think that he will not be able to rid himself of this grievous sickness, except by sallying forth frequently to visit his brethren [...]. When he cannot lead him astray in this manner, he puts him into the deepest sleep. In short, his attacks become stronger and more violent, and he cannot be beaten off except through prayer, through avoiding useless speech, through the study of the Holy Scriptures and through patience in the face of temptation. If he finds a monk unprotected by these weapons, he strikes him down with his arrows, making him a wayward and lazy wanderer [...]" He further mentions that, "The holy fathers of Egypt, who were brought up on the basis of these apostolic commandments, do not allow monks to be without work at any time, especially while they are young. They know that by persevering in work monks dispel listlessness [...] The fathers also say that as a rule someone who works is attacked and afflicted by but a single demon, while someone who does not work is taken prisoner by a thousand evil spirits."¹ My beloved, remember the words of Abba Zacharias who said, 'in my opinion, he is a monk who does violence to himself in everything.'² The dark period is not a time to throw in the towel, but a time to fight and do exactly the opposite.

Finally, one must wait on the Lord. Victory is not ours to take but it is for God to give and so we must humbly accept our period of darkness and trust that, although we do not feel grace as strong as we once did, God is always by our side supporting us and watching us. If we are being tested, then we will call on our Savior to stretch out His hand and lift us up, we will be faithful in all that is asked of us with prayer and thanksgiving, because we admit that our simple tasks, that were once pleasant, have become heavy burdens, and we cannot persevere on our own. Eventually this period of desolation will pass but we cannot passively wait for the hours and days to go by until we get there because this will distinguish between coming out of it maimed or wounded or enlightened and strengthened. When a soldier has a fervent devotion to his king he will fight to his death to defend his country; even if it may happen that years go by and this soldier is away from his homeland and feels distant and detached, in time of war he will get up, return to his king, gather his armor, join the forces and once again fight the battle.

May God grant us peace, joy and strength in times of trial and may we patiently endure until we rise once again. Glory be to God forever. Amen.

¹ *The Philokalia*. St. John Cassian. On the Eight Vices. On Listlessness. In N. T. Hagiorite, M. O. Corinth, G. Palmer, P. Sherrard, & K. Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), V1 p. 89.

² *The sayings of the Desert Fathers: the alphabetical collection*, Ward, B., trans. (London: Mowbray: Cistercian Publications, 1983), p.67.