



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

Monthly Message for the Monastic and Consecrated Servants

June 2018

My beloved,

I was thinking the other day about the bounty of God's love and about the different wonders God adorned this earth with, in order for us not to be limited in any way in experiencing His love. Have you ever paid attention to a school of fish or a flock of birds or a swarm of honeybees or even just waves in an ocean? Isn't there something magnificent about the harmony of their movements? Do they not seem to move as though they were only one synchronized being — as though they were only a single heart beating? There is always great strength and beauty found in unity and it fills everything in its surroundings with peace and a sense of awe, doesn't it? When founded in love, unity inspires humility, acceptance of one another and spiritual growth.

Pride is contrary to humility and so perhaps an army would not be the best example to use when making comparisons to a monastic community, however I would like to point out one thing that I believe we can benefit from — although they may not be motivated by love, soldiers find pride in their army because of its reputation and achievements (surely, if the army were defeated in every battle, no one would desire to enlist). And this success is gained by their unity. If an army were to march onto the field in a disorganized manner — each one marching at a different pace and in his own direction — each soldier looking to his own interests, without the same goal, mind or spirit, then wouldn't they be easily infiltrated and overcome by their enemy? “And if a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand.” (Mark 3:25). Such an army would be very weak indeed.

It is the same in a monastic community but with one significant difference — rather than motivated by pride, we are motivated by our love for God and love for one another and so the fabric of our unity is woven with humility. Through our love for one another, we are able to function as a single body in Christ. We need humility in order to have that same united rhythm in all that we do. Why? Because before joining the monastic life, we were all living according to our own desires and so we are filled with our own opinions, therefore in order for us to mold into only a single body, we must be easy to work with, we must be humble. Perhaps this is why God chose St. Pachomius, a former army soldier, to establish the monastic communal life — united soldiers in Christ.

St. Paul once spoke to the Corinthians about unity, emphasizing that everyone need not to be exactly the same in order to be united, but on the contrary, there is unity in diversity. Theodoret of Cyr, commenting on “If the whole body were an eye” (1 Cor. 12:17) said:

“Even if the body had only its most important member, it would still be useless without the others.”¹ Therefore unity is foreign to envy and judgment. We do not desire what others have nor to imitate what others are doing because our focus is solely on God and what He wills for us to do and to be. St. John Chrysostom said, “God has placed each part of the body where He has chosen, so we must not enquire any further as to why He has done it the way He has. For even if we would come up with ten thousand explanations, we would never find one better than this — that it pleased the Creator to make it the way He chose.”² If the foot were absorbed by thoughts of envy of the hand, convincing itself that it is more loved by God because it is above while the foot is below, then the body would be greatly afflicted!

As monastics, we are not troubled with thoughts of judgments about others, trying to make sense of “why?” and “how come?” because we trust that God has a plan for each one of us in order to make us into one body — and so our focus is on ourselves only and to be obedient in what we are asked to do while we also gladly accept, with the fullness of love, our brothers and sisters in exactly the way that they are. Neither the fish or the birds or the honeybees are clones of each other, yet when they have the same mission, they move in marvelous unison as one body towards one goal.

In times of trial, deceiving thoughts may come to us suggesting that the communal life is hindering our spiritual growth and that if we were independent, we would rise to great spiritual heights much quicker. Or thoughts that all the rules and responsibilities required of us in the communal life are inconsequential and really just a burden to our day; if we were permitted to run our day the way we desired rather than what we are asked to do, then we would be much more comfortable because we know better what is good for our growth! St. Mark the ascetic said, “no one can become a true Christian unless he gives himself up completely to the cross in a spirit of humility and self-denial, and makes himself lower than all, letting himself be trampled underfoot, insulted, despised, wronged, ridiculed and mocked; and all this he must endure joyfully for the Lord's sake, not claiming for himself in return any human advantages: glory, honor or praise, or the pleasures of food, drink or clothes.”³ It is easy to be united when we deny our own will and it is easy to *joyfully* deny our own will when we truly become a slave to all (Mark 10: 44). O Lord, grant me the freedom of slavery!

My very dear and beloved sons and daughters, I pray that we all find that great peace in being free from ourselves by crucifying our egos and following no other will than that of God. May God grant us to be free of our passions and to accept all things but to desire nothing at all.

May the peace and love of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Glory be to God forever. Amen.

¹ *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, Oden, Thomas C. (Illinois: Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999), p.125.

² *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, Oden, Thomas C. (Illinois: Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999), p.126.

³ *The Philokalia*. St. John Cassian. St. Mark the Ascetic. Letter to Nicolas the Solitary. In N. T. Hagiorite, M. O. Corinth, G. Palmer, P. Sherrard, & K. Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), V1 p. 149.