



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

Monthly Message for the Monastic

November 2018

My beloved children,

This month I would like to discuss with you the concept of ‘perceptual set’ and how it affects our dynamics with one another in our communal lives. Perceptual set is a predisposition to perceive particular features of a stimulus. It is a tendency to perceive or notice some aspects of the available sensory data and ignore others.¹ It is biased of course and is usually the cause of various issues within our community and/or our service and distracts us from the goal of our calling. To remedy the problem, we must delve within — to the kingdom we have within us — so that our outlook can come from the windows of heaven and not from our earthly experiences. “You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who *is in you* is greater than he who is in the world.”²

It is said that, depending on such things as our internal motivations, emotions, expectations, culture and personalities, we can make up our own version of reality in our community/service, which distorts the true reality we should be experiencing. Let us take, for example, someone who is internally motivated by the sense of belonging in a community and has begun placing great importance on relationships; this individual may be very sensitive to the choices others make that create in them a feeling of rejection or acceptance. They may perceive the community as one that is divided into certain groups and often feel alienated from others. In contrast, someone who is focused solely on God will have very little to no such feelings at all.

Furthermore, if we consider someone who is internally motivated by honor, then this individual may be satisfied with positions of authority and resist anyone who is a threat to their position. Perhaps this individual may be rigid in their ways and quick to perceive others as disobedient if they do not easily comply with them. In contrast, someone who seeks to be the least will see themselves as a servant and not be troubled by such matters.

We can also take the example of culture variations when it comes to certain things such as respect — let us imagine that the entire community is in the same room and experiencing the same thing at the same time — although the event is constant, each individual may have a completely different way of interpreting it. How could this be? It is said that everything we believe and have experienced in our lives impact how we interpret and experience all future events and stimuli. Our previous experiences influence our current ones.³ Thus, although we experienced the same thing, I may be completely offended by something that in no way offends the person standing next to me and in this way, the devil has much leeway to create confusion, misunderstandings, and division.

¹ McLeod, S. (1970, January 01). Saul McLeod. Retrieved from <https://www.simplypsychology.org/perceptual-set.html>

² 1 John 4:4

³ Stangor, C. (2014, September 26). Principles of Social Psychology — 1st international Edition. Retrieved from <https://opentextbc.ca/socialpsychology/chapter/individual-and-culture-differences-in-person-perception/>

We can go on at length sharing various examples, as there are many situations that we have or may encounter in our communal life that will have different interpretations depending on the observer. However, I would like to focus more on the remedy to the issue and how, irrespective of our perceptual sets, we can be “like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind.”⁴ The remedy is and will always be the internal struggle towards the virtue of humility.

St. Moses the Strong tells us that, “True discretion [...] is only secured by true humility. And of this humility the first proof is given by reserving everything (not only what you do but also what you think), for the scrutiny of the elders, so as not to trust at all in your own judgment but to acquiesce in their decisions in all points, and to acknowledge what ought to be considered good or bad by their traditions. And this habit will not only teach a young man to walk in the right path through the true way of discretion, but will also keep him unhurt by all the crafts and deceits of the enemy. For a man cannot possibly be deceived, who lives not by his own judgment but according to the example of the elders, nor will our crafty foe be able to abuse the ignorance of one who is not accustomed from false modesty to conceal all the thoughts which rise in his heart, but either checks them or suffers them to remain, in accordance with the ripened judgment of the elders. For a wrong thought is enfeebled at the moment that it is discovered.”⁵

My blessed children, let our internal motivation be that which was in our Lord Jesus Christ — “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.”⁶ When St. Paul spoke of unity to the Philippians he did so by telling them that this unity is to be found through humility — “Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.”⁷

We have a kingdom within us filled with every good thing. If we change our focus from our own expectations, culture and personalities and allow our internal motivations to be driven by the humility we learn from our Lord Jesus Christ, then we can strive to perfect our love for one another and to serve others rather than ourselves. When we encounter any situation that causes us to experience any negative thoughts and/or emotions, we should always quickly fight against it — run into the kingdom and remind ourselves not to trust our own judgment, but only that of our elders. Thus we should keep nothing hidden, but reveal all our thoughts in confession and check them to learn if they are in accordance with the commandments of God.

The key, my beloved, is to strive and to keep striving to live a life pleasing to God. May God strengthen you and may your lives be filled with blessings. Glory be to God forever. Amen.

⁴ Phil. 2:2

⁵ Cassian, J. (2006, June 02). John Cassian Conferences of the Desert Fathers. Retrieved from https://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/03600435_Cassianus_Institutes_Of_The_Coenobia_And_The_Remedies_Vol_2_EN.pdf

⁶ Phil. 2:5-8

⁷ Phil. 2:3-4