



## Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

### Monthly Message for the Monastic

April 2019

My beloved children,

Peace and grace.

As the blessed Great Fast is once again coming to a close, I would like to ask you a question that a monk once asked Saint John the Short: “What is a monk?”<sup>1</sup> If you could reply with just one word, what would yours be? If the monastic life is a path of Christian perfection — as our Lord Jesus Christ said, “be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Matt. 5:48) — then just as our saint replied, we would also say that a “monk is toil.” The truth is that anything that has any value to us is worth struggling for and anything that we struggle for then has a lot of value to us. So indeed, in everything a monk does, he must toil and in this way we no longer feel the pain of the struggle but we can taste the sweetness of it on our path — “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light” (Matt. 11:28-30).

There is a very beautiful sermon in Arabic by His Holiness Pope Shenouda about toil titled, “Toil for the Salvation of the Soul” that I recommend all of you to listen to. The sermon made me think of three things in the monastic life: life of praise and prayer, physical work, and communal life and I would like to mention a quick point about each one.

Sometimes we are asked the question, “How do you wake up every single day and praise at 4AM standing? Do you ever get used to it?” because from

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers; the alphabetical collection*, Ward, B., trans. (London: Mowbray: Cistercian Publications, 1983), p.93

an “outside” perspective it seems quite odd for one to do this for the rest of their lives. Four O’clock in the morning definitely forces our bodies out of its natural state of rest but isn’t that exactly the point — we desire to give our Lord Jesus Christ everything that we have because He has given us *everything* that He has. And what do we humans have to offer in comparison to what we receive? Of course God does not need anything from us, but we all know very well that when we love, we never cease giving because it brings us joy and deepens our relationship with the other. When we love, we sacrifice our time, our rest, our opinions, our pleasures, our own lives for the other person and we do this with the greatest joy. Ask any mother if she thinks the sacrifices she makes for her newborn is worth it; yes she is exhausted but she would give even more if she could. “Honor the Lord with your possessions, and with the firstfruits of all your increase” (Prov. 3:9) — we think of monetary offerings when we read this verse, but we can also apply it to ourselves and give God from the firstfruits of everything He has entrusted us with — “And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.” (Mark 12:30).

Why do we work so hard in the community? Are all these hours really necessary when we have purposed to devote our lives to prayer and meditation? We often find ourselves complaining about the amount of work and the hours involved and how tired we are, but my beloved, do not look at it this way, and be free of such nagging thoughts. We do not work because we are commissioned as a condition to living in the community, but we do so because we came here to serve the Lord our God and to grow daily in our love with Him. Can a relationship really grow without any toil? Absolutely not. Can a couple get married and both sit at home all day and hope that the dynamic of their relationship will positively flourish? I am sure that would be nice for them, but it is not reality. We know very well the negative effects of being idle; we both know biblical examples and we know very well the outcome of idleness in our own lives and we know energy that is renewed in us from being active. Work is not something to be looked at as a chore, but understood as an act of love and prayer — “Receive him therefore in the Lord with all gladness, and hold such men in esteem; because for the work of Christ he came close to death, not regarding his life, to supply what was lacking in your service toward me.” (Phil. 2:29-30). How beautiful is this — to give to the point of not even regarding my very own life, let alone my time, desires, and comfort. This is a freeing act of love and toil that is worth it.

Living in a closed community is not easy because it requires constant toil and self-denial. However, trust that every sacrifice is known by God. Every difficult act of love is known by God. It is toil that is worth it and toil that is rewarded, “Give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you.” (Luke 6:38). God is worth accepting the injustice from your brother/sister. God is worth going the extra mile when you are already exhausted. God is worth giving even when you are not receiving. God is worth submitting when it is difficult on the ego. God is worth keeping silent so the opinion of another can be considered instead of yours. God is worth hiding from the glory of man and taking the last seat. God is worth the toil of love for your brothers and sisters in the closed community. The toil that will purify you daily and help you grow.

I encourage you to listen to the beautiful sermon by our beloved Pope Shenouda. It is one that revives the spirit and reminds us that toiling for our Lord Jesus Christ is the absolute most worthwhile blessing we have to experience in this sojourn on earth.

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

Glory be to God forever. Amen.