



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States
Monthly Questions and Answers
April 2019

Q1: I am working in a team and those less senior than me do not obey what I tell them to do – what do I do?

A1: Our Lord Jesus Christ said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave — just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.” (Matt. 20:25-28).

We have chosen a life of obedience and therefore, of course, one should obey what they are asked to do — whether it is from their superior or their subordinate — however as a senior responsible for a task, we should not be upset if those working with us choose not to take the blessing of obedience.

We are each called to be faithful and to follow the commandments of our Lord Jesus Christ, we are not called to make sure others follow them.

When we find our brother/sister struggling to deny their will, we should not judge them but we should pray for them that the Lord strengthens them and have hope in their growth and victory — “Who are you to judge another’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand.” (Rom. 14:4).

Q2: Sometimes I don't want to ask a question for the fear that I might receive an answer that I'm not ready to obey. Is this wrong or it is okay to wait until I feel more ready spiritually?

A2: While St. Paul was in prison, he wrote a letter to the Philippians saying, “Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and

trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure." (Phil. 2:12-13). Sometimes it happens that we reach a lukewarm state in our spiritual lives and we no longer feel the zeal to push ourselves any further; maybe even feeling that we are comfortable as we are and that there's really no need. However, here St. Paul mentions a few important things that I think would help address your question.

I say with St. Paul, "as you have always obeyed" - you are my dearly beloved children, I know each one of you and your struggle and the life of obedience you have chosen to live.

"not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence," - when I hear of your good works even when I am not in the monastery or convent, my heart truly rejoices, as I know that you strive not to please me nor man, but to please the One who called you to this life.

"work out your own salvation with fear and trembling;" - never lose the desire to "strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able." (Luke 13:24). My beloved, "The kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force." (Matt. 11:12). We have not chosen a life of comfort and luxury, but a life of ascetic struggle. I know that, at times, it could be very difficult, but I pray for you unceasingly to always have the fear of God and to seek to work out our own salvation even at the most challenging times.

"for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure." St. John Chrysostom said, "If you have the will, then He works with the willing. Do not be afraid or weary. He gives us both zeal and performance. For when we will, He will henceforth augment our willing."

So, no I don't think that you should wait to ask a question out of fear that it will be difficult to obey. Desire to have the will to live a life of self-denial, so that you can be a true light bearer, and God will make the burden you carry sweet and light.

Q3: Your Grace once mentioned that the life of a monk is a mystery. Can Your Grace please elaborate on this?

A3: When I was living in the monastery, I did not seek to know anything about the personal struggles of the fathers. Regardless of the different personalities, the fathers, to me, were like angels on this earth. Not involving myself in the details of their private lives and abiding by the words of St. Isaac the Syrian who said, "love all men, but keep distant from all men" helped me love and respect them without partiality.

St. Isaac the Syrian also said that "nothing so quenches the fire that the Holy Spirit breathes into a monk's heart for the sanctification of his soul, as familiar intercourse, much speaking, and association, except it be with initiates of God's mysteries for the nurturing and amplification of his knowledge [...] have none but such men for your friends and sharers of your secrets, lest you place a stumbling-block for your soul and stray from the way of the Lord."

We are not without the knowledge that silence is an important virtue in the monastic life; we must be very watchful of the little foxes that seems harmless but are purposed to eventually stray us from the way of the Lord. Remember the words of H.H. Pope Shenouda who said, "What concern is it of mine? Let me keep to myself."

The fathers were mysteries to us because they guarded their hearts and controlled their tongues. We not only learned from them more by their example rather than their words, but we also felt that they were filled with the fire of the Holy Spirit, because of their constant silent discourse with their God.

Q4: Your Grace often mentions that confession should only take a few minutes - I think I'm doing something wrong because mine usually take much longer. Can Your Grace please help guide me as to what may be the issue?

A4: The issue may be several things but let me address one for now. What is confession? Confession is one of the seven Sacraments of our Church and included in one of the four which are necessary for our salvation. It is a holy sacrament by which we return to God in a spirit of repentance.

If we properly examine ourselves every day and keep track of the sins we are committing — striving always to follow the commandments of God — when time for confession comes, we make a point-form list of our sins and verbally share these with our confession father. If advice is needed to be given, we receive it in a spirit of obedience and then we faithfully strive to cease from sin and follow the spiritual guidance.

Centuries ago, monks would receive a "word to live by" from their spiritual father and faithfully then "live by" it until they meet again. Nowadays one can speak for an extended time, but find that the receiver needs more convincing.

Confession is not a time to vent our feelings about the weaknesses of others nor is it a time for justification of our actions. Believe me, when you feel the need to rush to me in order to justify yourself before I hear the story from someone else, know that this isn't from God. Trust in God and keep your focus on Him.