



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

**Q5:** I communicate a lot with laypeople - mostly of the opposite gender - via the phone and internet, but it's completely spiritual. Is this okay?

**A5:** There is a famous story in The Sayings of the Desert Fathers that some people find to be entertaining but that isn't meant to be — when a high-ranking, God-fearing woman visited St. Arsenius and asked that he remember her and pray for her, the saint replied, "I pray God to remove the remembrance of you from my heart." Afterwards when the woman was falling into despair because of what was said to her, Pope Theophilus comforted her by assuring her that St. Arsenius will pray for her, but explained that he said this because it is through women that the enemy wages war against the saints.

For the same reason, St. Isaac the Syrian said that if you are compelled to speak with women, turn your face from the sight of them and speak with them in this manner. He further said, "But as from fire, and as from the snare of the devil, keep yourself from nuns; from meetings with them, and conversations, and the sight of them; lest your heart be chilled from the love of God, and you pollute your heart with the mire of passions. [...] Avoid familiarities and conversations with youth as friendship with the devil. But have one confidant and sharer of your secrets; a man who fears God, and who always pays heed to himself; one who is poor in his place and dwelling, but rich in the mysteries of God. Hide your secrets, your doings, and your warfare from all. Do not sit without a head covering before anyone else, except in the case of necessity."

The point of these sayings is that a monastic must always be on guard and always watchful. Communicating with laypeople of the opposite gender, especially when it seems innocent and comfortable (i.e. "completely spiritual") can be very dangerous for both parties. As we said before, the life of a monastic is a mystery, and his/her doings and warfare should be kept that way.

My advice is twofold — first, a monastic should have very limited use of technology. There is no need to be using phones and internet so often. When asked why he avoids his fellow monastics, St. Arsenius said, "God knows that I love you, but I cannot live with God and with men. The thousands and ten thousands of the heavenly hosts have but one will, while men have many." Second, the life of a

monastic is discipleship; you have taken a vow of obedience and should not be living according to your own will and direction. If you feel that you would like to communicate with a layperson of the opposite gender, then first seek the blessing to do so, for this may be harmful for you even if you don't see it.

I would like to also mention that the Holy Spirit works in all of us and we each know, when speaking to our Spiritual Father, if we are leaving out details that are important and if we are essentially lying. We may do this in order to receive a certain response or out of fear, but either way, we all know very well when we are doing this. I would like you to know that lying to your Spiritual Father is lying to the Holy Spirit. Remember the story of Ananias and Sapphira. You are not deceiving me, you are deceiving yourselves. Pray that God give you the courage to always be faithful and honest with Him.

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**Q6:** How do I keep my joy or rather how do I find it again? Sometimes it feels like I lost it a long time ago and I'm just going through the motions.

**A6:** At every one of our consecrations we heard the following verse being read: "My son, if you come to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for temptation." (Sir. 2:1) and we each joyfully and gladly accepted. Then when temptation came, in shock, we said إيه دا ("what is this?!") and forgot our calling to the narrow path.

St. Paul said, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written: "For Your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.

For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Rom. 8:35-39).

So yes there will be dry stages, difficult stages, and even what seems to be terrifyingly impossible stages, but don't let any of those things keep you down. Get up and persevere. Keep toiling and you will be granted that joy. Look to your brothers and sisters for a helping hand and don't be afraid of the darkness... remember the words of our beloved Pope Shenouda who said, "this too will end."

Our Lord Jesus Christ knows well how hard it's been for you. He knows your heart and sees your tears; it is He who said, "I know your works, your labor, your patience... and you have persevered and have patience and have labored for My

name's sake and have not become weary" (Rev. 2:2-3). The joy will come, just don't give up.

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**Q7:** Beloved Father, give us words to live by.

**A7:** Listen more than you speak for it is better to be a disciple than a teacher.

Give more than you receive. There's always going to be someone in the monastery that needs help; ask God to lead your way before you make the decision to take a day off.

Gives thanks more than complain because there is always more things to be thankful for than there are things to complain about.

Even if your first reaction is to be agitated, accept the humiliation that comes to you as a remedy for your pride.

Run to make peace rather than wait for the other person to initiate reconciliation.

Try to do things "their way" rather than "your way".

Pray early rather than delay and delay until you're too tired to do anything at all.

Be content in whatever state you are in rather than make suggestions on how to make things better for yourself.

Pray for wisdom every day and don't forget to ask God the simple question, "is this pleasing to You?" before you make any decisions.

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**Q8:** What do I do if I see my brother doing something wrong?

**A8:** "They said of Abba Macarius the Great that he became, as it is written, a god upon the earth, because, just as God protects the world, so Abba Macarius would cover the faults which he saw, as though he did not see them; and those which he heard, as though he did not hear them."

I think the goal of all things is to strive to live by the two great commandments God gave us: to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and mind and our neighbor as ourselves (Matt. 22:36-40). With this in mind we will examine our hearts when we believe that we have seen something harmful and, through prayer, we will know if our hearts are in the right place.

If we feel close enough to the person in question and we feel that, out of true love, we should talk to them in order to help them back up, then with guidance, it is okay to do so. Otherwise, we should learn from our forefathers and cover the sins of our brother as our Lord Jesus Christ covers our sins. Who are we to judge another's servant? To his own master he stands or falls (Rom. 14:4)

We should be careful with our words when speaking to others and careful not to repeat negative things about one another. May love abound more and more.