



Coptic Orthodox

Diocese of the Southern

United States

Monthly Questions and Answers

August 2019

Q17: I know that God is the one who calls but I feel slightly culture shocked in the community and I often don't know how to deal with it.

A17: I understand that there's usually a process and a transition involved in acclimating to a new culture and environment but I believe this, like anything else in our Christian life, is a call to make a sacrifice. There can be no true love without true sacrifice and because a true sacrifice requires a denial of self, we struggle and find our circumstances to be very difficult, or even "shocking".

I don't think it would have been difficult for God to make us clones of one another in terms of culture but He didn't do this. Why, I wonder? Perhaps it's so the language of love can prevail over the differences in perspectives and behaviors.

Instead of having a negative reaction to the differences, why don't we try embracing them instead? Dr. Stephen Covey, the author of the book, *The 7 Habit of Highly Effective People* mentions that we should seek to understand first and then to be understood; by doing the opposite, we ignore the other person and can understand them only through our own experiences, rather than by who they really are.

If we negatively react to differences, we will eventually find ourselves divided and ignorant. Maybe we can try coming out of your comfort zone and exploring uncharted territory for the sake of love. I believe that by doing this, God will grant you much grace and you will feel much more comfortable in your environment.

Q18: I've heard it said about me that I'm controlling and tough to work with. I don't feel that this is necessarily true. What should I do about this?

A18: Self-examination is imperative to our monastic calling. The Fathers taught us to always examine ourselves — to bring each thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ (2 Cor. 10:5) — in order that we may derive benefit from all things and grow spiritually — to understand where the thought is coming from and where it is going. We should not simply behave carelessly without any thought as to why we do the things we do.

In the Psalms we read: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me, and know my anxieties; And see if there is any wicked way in me, And lead me in the way everlasting." Therefore, when we are criticized, we should first consider whether this thing is truly in us or not.

Through prayer, if we find it to be something true in us, then we should prostrate and apologize to our brother/sister and pray and work on changing this behavior. If, in the same manner, we find that we do not have this weakness, then an apology is still called for because we have upset our brother/sister but perhaps, in this case, we need to communicate with each other and understand how and why this perception is occurring.

Remember always that our ego doesn't like to be examined and it gets angry and seeks to justify itself by any means. If we give in to this we, unfortunately, will profit nothing. However, if we put our ego aside for a moment and pray about the matter and ask God to reveal the truth in us so that we may be cleansed and grow in Him, we will surely greatly benefit. This is what the saints are made out of.

Q19: I have forgotten my first love and I have fallen off track. How do I find my way back?

A19: Try and first discover from where you strayed. When we lose our way, we usually retrace our steps in order to discover where we took a wrong turn and then we get back on track and try again.

If, for instance, you discover that you socialize far too much and that this is taking you away from your cell, then reexamine your choices. If it is that you feel unfairly treated, then immerse yourself in the Holy Bible and the readings of the Desert Fathers and you will be freed from these shackles. Maybe it is that you have come to a certain slackness and lack of zeal in your monastic canons, in that case push yourself to be diligent and persevere.

If you feel that, after searching, you still cannot get "back" to where you were, try these practical steps:

- 1) Ask the grace of God every morning
- 2) Create a practical schedule for yourself
- 3) Try more than your best to stick to your schedule
- 4) Examine yourself every night what you did in the day
- 5) Keep record of your canon in an excel sheet
- 6) Send me the excel sheet daily
- 7) Pray at night asking for forgiveness and for a grace for the night and the following day

Don't worry so much. Take one thing at a time until you find your way back home.

Q20: Last month Your Grace mentioned that “mandatory is not always a bad thing” when it came to Midnight Praises or certain rules in the Monastery/Convent – I don’t feel this to be true. Actually, I feel that sometimes when something is mandatory, it takes away the passion and love I used to have doing it out of my own free will.

A20: I understand what you mean; I understand that you may feel confused about whether you are doing something, which you used to love, because you *still* love it or just because it is mandatory.

Well, the truth is that maybe right now you are only doing it [Midnight Praises] because it is mandatory, but let me ask you — had it not been mandatory, do you really think you would still be attending, out of your own free will, with passion and love for it?

What I am trying to say is that the obedience to attending something because it is mandatory creates in us a beautiful discipline that carries us through lukewarm periods in our spiritual lives.

It cannot be that a Mother *always* has the same passion to feed and change her child. Certainly, there are times when she is not in a good mood or simply exhausted or maybe even ill. However, out of her great love for her child, she doesn’t base her actions on her changing feelings — today I will feed my child and tomorrow maybe not.

It’s the same with us — out of our love for God we carry on. Perhaps we don’t “feel” like it today, but thank God the responsibility to be obedient to the rule will carry us through these emotions so that we can take the great blessing of offering a sacrifice of praise to our Creator.

Q21: Sometimes I just don’t feel happy and it troubles me.

A21: This is okay; it is normal that we have ups and downs. This should not worry you in and of itself.

However, if your unhappiness stems from sin, this is another matter. In this case, examine yourself and see if there is a spiritual illness which needs remedy.

Some symptoms of illness:

Pride: desire for authority, defensive when criticized or given advice, often complaining and not accepting others, preferring to work alone, resistance to submitting to the authority of others, never apologizing or saying "I've sinned, Forgive me" ...

Anger: ignoring others, selfishness, complaining, remembering wrongs, blaming rather than accepting blame, holding grudges, lack of gentleness and compassion...

Judgement: gossiping, showing partiality...

Lying: not being faithful in confession, lying to others because of fear of getting into trouble and/or so we can do our own will...

Some remedies from the Monastic Vow:

- 1) Voluntary poverty: not walking according to my own will and desires.
- 2) Obedience: abiding by all the rules and regulations and to be honest and diligent in the duties assigned to me.
- 3) Chastity: in all of my sense. Not raise my voice in the monastery.
- 4) Consistency in my canon: reading of the Holy Bible and Paradise of the Fathers — these are what protect me and correct me.
- 5) Consistency in partaking of the Divine Sacraments, attending Midnight Praises and Vespers.
- 6) Commit to a life of stillness and meditation.
- 7) Not to seek to go out of the monastery.

May the Lord empower you and grant you joy.