



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

Monthly Questions and Answers October 2019

Q26: What inspires unity in a community?

A26: What unites us to one another in the community is the very same thing that unites each one of us to all of our brothers and sisters across the world. It is not so much through the effort and focus on one another, but by the power of the Holy Spirit that we find our hearts and minds united as one.

Remember Moses—this meek Man of God was given the opportunity, by God Himself, to lead a more pious and obedient people, but being a true servant and faithfully united to those whom he served, he pleaded with God for second chance.

We have been given the most beautiful and powerful gift—the Holy Spirit that fills us with love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. It is through this very same spirit that we are united—not just in the convent/monastery but in the entire world—as children of God, "For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God." (Rom. 8:14)

So I remind you, my beloved, to continually speak to God on your Mount Sinai—cling to Him so that you may be filled with the Holy Spirit and radiate that light which will drive you to love one another as you love yourselves; to have internal peace and joy and to share that with others in times of trial and tribulation; to endure and forgive each other all weaknesses; to be kind and gentle and to control yourselves from any harsh judgments or words ; to be humble and submissive and quick to serve and go the second mile for each other; and this all with great faithfulness and trust in God and one another.

May God grant us to let go of our selfish desires, to deny ourselves and to be led by the Spirit of God, that we may be called sons and daughters of God.

Q27: Why are there so many rules in the monastic life?

A27: It's true, there are many rules in the monastic life, but let me also ask you a question—if there were little to no rules, what do you think would happen? I would like you to truly take a moment and consider your answer before continuing to read.

Rules are beneficial for several reasons—one of these is that they help us in times of weakness when our own will would have otherwise lead us astray. Psalm 119 says, *"How can a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed according to Your work. With my whole heart I have sought You; Oh, let me not wander from Your commandments! Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You."*

Yes, one could say, "but these are God's commandments, what about man's commandments in the monastic life?" Well, to begin with, there's an issue if we perceive things in this manner—1 Peter chapter 2 speaks of our calling to submit ourselves to *"every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake,"*. If one of the 3 major vows of the monastic life is obedience, do we not think that perhaps God is in control of what we will be called to be obedient to? Therefore, our resistance to submit is not towards man, but towards God.

Another reason rules are beneficial is because in the monastic life we can find different backgrounds, opinions and personalities, thus rules help create a peaceful and stable environment suitable for the community.

I recommend that when we begin to feel troubled by the rules of the monastic life, we should turn to prayer and make our feelings known to God so that, in turn, we may receive enlightenment and inner peace concerning this matter. We should also continually immerse ourselves in reading about the lives of the Desert Fathers, their sayings and the monastic books. These will remind us of the great danger of walking according to our own will (something we vow against in the monastic vows) and the blessings of being obedient to the rules of the monastery/convent (something also found in our monastic vows).

My beloved children, our Lord Jesus Christ said, *"If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?"* (Matt. 16:24-26). He did not say, "If you would like to die to the world and follow Me in Paradise now, then come with all your wills, opinions and personal desires. For whoever desires to save his life should find it and be assertive in living it. For what profit is it to a man if he submits and loses all the desires of his ego?"

May the Lord grant us to live joyfully in chastity, poverty, and obedience.

Q28: I understand the importance of work for our spiritual lives and I personally suffer a lot when I'm idle, but I often find myself falling into laziness and boredom. What shall I do?

A28: Let me share with you some stories from the *Paradise of the Holy Fathers* —

"A certain brother asked an old man, saying, 'Why do I feel disgusted when sitting in my cell, and sluggish in respect of works of spiritual excellence? The old man answered, saying, 'Because you do not keep in mind the rest which those who labor expect, and the torments which are laid up for the lazy. For if, in the very truth, you were seeing these things, you would be watchful and strenuous in your labor.'

"Abba Poemen used to say, 'As smoke drives bees away, and men take the sweetness of their labor, even so also does the ease of the body drive away the fear of God from the heart, and it carries away all the good effect of its labor.'

"There was an old man in the cells named Apollo. Whenever a brother came to call him to work, he would go joyfully, saying, 'I go today with the King Christ to work on my own behalf, for this is the reward of this labor.'

Perhaps the first saying is related to fear of punishment, the second to fear of God and the last for love of God. If you are aware that the devil works well in those who have fallen into laziness, then by either of these means, push yourself and make the conscious effort to physically go and do some physical work that is different than your routine.

Perhaps you can try something like this—wake up very early and complete your prostrations and a portion of your psalms. Ask the Lord to help you begin your day with an energetic spirit and attend all communal prayers with a prayerful mind, not just a robotic spirit. Talk to Him about everything with joy and most importantly, with thanksgiving.

Afterwards, perhaps outside of the hours of your responsibilities, you may see who else needs a helping hand in something they are doing. This will grant you a blessing of service and a more joyous and active spirit.

While you're working, pray or, if you are not able, listen to an uplifting hymn or sermon.

Have a to-do list and check off the items as you go through your day so this can be a source of encouragement.

Also take breaks when you need to and don't forget to smile.

May God empower you and grant you strength and may you return to the zeal you are longing for.

Q29: The commandment says to love my enemies as myself, but I can barely love all my brothers/sisters without partiality, let alone as myself. How can I truly believe that I am the least of all and that everyone is better than me when, for a fact, I see others behaving in such stumbling ways?

A29: I understand that it may be a challenge not to judge others we see behaving improperly and not to label them as "bad" while we see ourselves as better, and not to think, "I would never do such a thing!" when comparing ourselves to them. However, I would like for us to remember two things: first, that our very judgment of their sin, is a sin itself — "Abba Theodore also said, [...] And he who said, 'Do not commit fornication,' also said, "Do not judge.", and also, that the key to knowing that everyone is better than us, is to truly know ourselves”.

Remember that beautiful story of our beloved St. Moses the Strong and the sack of sand that was leaking behind him as he walked to judge a monk. At that time, St. Moses was an elder and could very well have attended this meeting with the thought that his experience would allow him to judge the actions of another for the benefit of the community; but St. Moses did not do this. St. Moses was meek and humble and had the grace of seeing only his own sins before his eyes. He truly believed in his heart that he was chief of all sinners and so, as the story goes, he let the sand fall behind him as a representation of his own sins that he leaves behind as he goes to judge another.

So, my dear beloved, I understand. I understand that we get affected by the actions of others and, in our weakness, we are made to stumble. Nevertheless, when we feel inclined to judge another, we must quickly ask for God's grace in order to turn our thoughts onto ourselves and to consider our own sins. Are we really more righteous than St. Moses who himself couldn't judge his brother? Could we truly make claims like, "I would never do this" as though our good things come for us and not from our Father in Heaven?

We may not admit it all the time, but if we at least believe that there's a possibility that we aren't as great as we think we are, then let us pray to have the grace to know ourselves and our own sins; and in this way, we will never judge anyone and also in this way, we will know that we truly are the least of all our brethren.

Q30: I pray my psalms, I read the Holy Bible, the sayings of the desert fathers, and monastic books but I still feel unhappy or not satisfied. What's missing?

A30: My dear son/daughter, it pains me to hear that you feel unhappiness, but I have confidence in God that this will pass.

I want you to ask yourself if in the midst of fulfilling what is required of you, if you are also speaking to your Beloved and giving thanks and sharing the feelings of your heart. I would like you to examine your ways and see if there are any challenges in you; by this I mean—are you often the one to challenge how and why the monastery/convent is doing things? Constantly making "suggestions" in various aspects of the monastery/convent services? Doing things "your way" as opposed to what is asked of you or simply not asking the blessing of the elders before doing something "your way"?

My point is that we talk about this very, very often but the truth is that we have a choice in our monastic life to either give up our will completely and be enslaved by God or not to (and each one knows what "not to" entails to him/her). If you do nothing—absolutely nothing—of your own will, and I really mean absolutely nothing of your own will, there my child, I promise you, you will find peace. There you will find contentment. There you will find God.

I do not say that you will be without difficulties, hard times, tribulations, beatings to your ego—yes, you will find all these things and more! But you will be living according to His will and not your own. The hands that move you will be His and not your own.

One must first empty himself—give himself up and all his own desires and be a vessel in which God may pour Himself into completely. "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me;" (Gal. 2:20) and there you will find your happiness.

May God grant you healing and joy in the right time; "by your patience possess your souls." (Luke 21:19).