



## Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

### Monthly Questions and Answers November 2019

**Q31: What are the boundaries in friendships in the monastic life? How can I set proper boundaries in order not to waste time in idle talk nor fall into unhealthy attachments?**

**A31:** This question is important because every one of us needs some sort of support and so we search for companionship in the monastery/convent in order to attain this. Therefore, it is important to discover the proper balance regarding this point, in order not to stray from our goal.

There have been monastic ways of life that began at the start of monasticism but are less common today.

The St. Anthony way of life, which was complete seclusion, was not very successful because, as social beings we grow through interrelations and communication. The St. Pachomius way of life, which was complete communal living, where several monks shared even the same cell, was also not very successful because there was little privacy.

We have also heard of famous duos in the monastic history such as St. Maximus and St. Domatius, who lived together and were a complete support to one another. However, the issue with such ways of life is that there is little respect for privacy—the concept of boundaries is almost completely unknown.

In the end, it was the St. Macarius way of life which proved to be the most successful because it kept the balance between both solitary and communal life, with everyone having their own cell and private prayer life but also a certain level of interaction and relationship with others.

Within the St. Macarius way of life, we can cross proper boundaries and find the following issues within relationships:

1. A monastic who is looking to spend all their time with another without asking if this other person has the time for this. Resulting in much wasted time.
2. Familiarity ensuing from frequent interactions and resulting in gossip.

3. Formation of a clique which includes some and excludes others resulting in disunity.
4. Unhealthy emotional attachment where one person finds their sole emotional fulfillment to be found in another. Resulting in a distorted self-worth.
5. Jealousy within the relationship and within the community.

Not keeping healthy boundaries can be a serious issue and can be a great obstacle to our spiritual growth.

A lack of boundaries can also be an issue for those with shy personalities. For instance, if I am a shy person and I don't feel comfortable being direct, then if someone comes to my cell and wastes my time, I will be too embarrassed to ask them to leave.

Such people should recall the verse from the Wisdom of Sirach, "For the sake of your soul, you should not be ashamed to speak the truth. For there is a shame that brings sin, and there is a shame that brings glory and grace." (Sir. 4:24-25) and not be ashamed to be direct.

The concept of boundaries is lost with a lot of people. Most especially with shy people who feel guilty saying no and it is likewise lost with people who have no respect for the boundaries of others—

One of the nicest examples I read concerning boundaries relates to doors. The function of any door is to be opened to let in the good and shut to keep out the bad. They say that there are four incorrect uses of the "doors":

1. Reversing the functionality and opening the door to let in the bad and closing to keep out the good. This occurs with avoidant personalities who, for instance, may need help but refuse when someone offers (closing the door to good things).
2. Opening the door out of weakness. For instance, someone may want to gossip or discuss politics or matters that should not be discussed and you open the door because you are not able to say "no".
3. Forcing doors open. This occurs with controlling personalities who force themselves on others and take advantage of their kindness.

There are two types of controlling personalities: the "Manipulative Controller" who uses guilt to get their way and/or the "Aggressive Controller" who uses anger to get their way.

4. Closing another person's door and preventing them from receiving good things. For instance, someone may need help and someone else may notice and head over to help them, but you convince this person not to go. You prevent them from receiving good things.

I must understand the concept of boundaries and know how to properly use my “door” and respect the “doors” of others. I should also be mindful of the fruitfulness of my relationships—if a friendship is not helping me grow spiritually then distance is better; this is why St. Isaac the Syrian said, “Love all men, but keep distant from all men.”

If a friendship is bringing me down, leads to gossip, discussion of politics, creates negativity in my heart, has emotional attachment, my self-worth is depended on this relationship, there is competition, jealousy—any of such things—then this friendship is not healthy and needs proper boundaries.

If this is difficult for you to do, then remind yourself of the verse from the Wisdom of Sirach, “For the sake of your soul, you should not be ashamed to speak the truth. For there is a shame that brings sin, and there is a shame that brings glory and grace.” (Sir. 4:24-25)

On another note, there are also unhealthy friendships outside the monastic community.

I can personally find out about the news of the monastery/convent from laypeople and I ask myself, “How do these people know all this information?” It is from the monastics themselves. Is it wise to share such private matters with laypersons? Is it wise to complain about each other to laypersons?

All this can be a stumbling block to people who are not spiritually ready to receive this information and so to what benefit or for what reason do we permit ourselves to share?

We also make the mistake of sharing private information with our biological family. I personally have spoken about certain conditions I lived in when I first joined the monastery, but do you think I shared this with my biological family at the time? How do you think they would have felt had I told them all these things?

Why would I share information about being upset with a monk or nun and ruin the reputation of my brother/sister to my biological family? Me and my brother/sister will reconcile but the family will be left with a bad impression.

No one relates a story without some form of bias, so these reports are from our own personal perspective and can be very damaging.

We need to learn to set healthy boundaries and always ask ourselves, “am I growing spiritually through this relationship?” If not, then remember St. Isaac’s words, “Love all men, but keep distant from all men.”

**Q32: Why do we lie to others and how do we remedy this issue?**

**A32:** Lying has many causes.

Maybe it's done out of fear— I'm afraid to get into trouble or to face something difficult, and so I lie.

Maybe it's to get out of a situation I don't want to be in— I could claim to be sick because I don't want to go to work or prayer. Or I could tell my brother/sister that I'm not upset at them, even though I am, in order to avoid having a conversation about the issue.

Or I lie because I want to get something—I could deceive my way with lies in order to try to get what I want in any given circumstance.

Maybe I lie in order to ruin someone's reputation for whatever bad intention may be in my heart.

Exaggeration is also lying—when we exaggerate anything at all, we are not telling the truth. His Holiness Pope Shenouda used to say, "A monk should be precise in his speech."

Remember that our Lord Jesus Christ said these two things:

"You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it." (John 8:44)

"Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life.'" (John 14:6)

Also it is written, "Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord, but those who deal truthfully are His delight" (Prov. 12:22) — if we are not ashamed to lie before God, then we should examine ourselves and see how and why we have reached this point.

"and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death." (Rev. 21:8) What, in our heart, has taken precedence over the One who hears and will judge us on the last day? Is a temporal victory on this earth worth losing eternal life?

The first step remedying lying is to return and tell the truth to the one you lied to, every single time you lie. If you do this, by God's grace, you will eventually stop lying.

**Q33: How do I deal with someone who seems to always be projecting their feelings onto me?**

**A33:** Endure. How will one learn virtue if they do not learn to endure? St. Paul the Hermit said, "He who flees from tribulation, flees from God".

**Q34: What are the causes of low self-esteem?**

**A34:** There are several causes. One of them could be childhood — perhaps a child was often told that they are not good enough — or one could be continuously failing in something they wish to succeed in or it could simply be a comparison one makes of themselves with others.

The remedy to low self-esteem is to trust in God. Yes, I am nothing, but "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." (Phil. 4:13). The more someone turns to God and trusts in Him, the more they will know that they are loved and that God has good plans for them; they will understand that God gives strength and that they will indeed be victorious according to God's timing and will.