



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

Monthly Message for the Monastic

January 2020

My very dear sons and daughters,

As we have entered into a new year—and so in some way a new beginning—I would like you to recall the beginning of your journey to the royal path to which you were called.

As Monks, Nuns and Consecrated Servants, you are as Nazirites—separated for God alone. Remember the words of Archangel Gabriel to Zacharias concerning St. John the Baptist, *“For he will be great in the sight of the Lord and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God.”* (Luke 1:15-16). As a Nazarite, St. John the Baptist had to abide by certain rules— drink no wine, grow his hair, and not touch a dead body; it is the same with us—we are guided by certain rules of conduct which separates us from the rest of the world. I believe that abiding by what is holy and distinguishing that from what is unholy, we too may turn many to the Lord their God by living example.

“For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more.” (Luke 12:48) God asks His children, who have been consecrated to Him, more than what is asked of others. They cannot behave in simply any manner, even though that manner may not be sinful in and of itself. For instance, is drinking coffee wrong? How about tea? No it is not wrong, but is it possible for me to take the chalice from the Altar and drink coffee or tea from it? No? Why not? Because this chalice has been consecrated to God—separated for His service alone. Therefore the actions themselves may not be wrong—speaking, possessing, eating, leading, defending—but for a monastic, whose life focuses on prayer, silence, poverty, submission, and acceptance they are not considered as what is holy.

The world tells us one thing—be assertive, speak our minds, have knowledge, have possessions, feast well and sleep well, become leaders and seek justice, but our calling tells another, *“In every aspect, therefore, the beauties of a monk’s life should shine forth, namely: in elevation above the visible world; scrupulous non-*

possessiveness; perfect contempt of the flesh; sublime fasting; constancy in silence; orderly discipline of the senses; careful watch over the sight; the cutting off all contention with any man over anything pertaining to this age; brevity in speech; purity from the remembrance of wrongs;”¹ This variance is, again, to distinguish our conduct from that of the world. It is for this reason that Aaron—the first high priest of God’s people—was taught to distinguish between what is holy and unholy. However I feel that this isn’t very clear in our minds.

There are three dedications to holiness in the Holy Scriptures: time, place and people.

Concerning time, the Holy Scriptures teaches us that Sunday is the day of the Lord, “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.” (Ex. 20:8) In the Old Testament one was punished for not keeping this day holy, but today all days seem to be alike. Actually, in our case, they should be—making every day the day of the Lord. Everything we do on these days should be holy and focused on God. It is not right to do anything otherwise. The same also applies to feast days and fasting days—the focus is on our Creator and not the created things.

“If you intend to dedicate your soul to the work of prayer, which purifies the mind and to night vigil in order to acquire an illumined intellect, betake yourself far from the sight of the world, sever all intercourse, and, even on seemingly good pretexts, do not allow friends to visit you in your cell, as is the custom, but only those who think and live as you do and are your fellow initiates. [...] To exchange one converse for another, occupy yourself with reading books which will make plain to you the subtle pathways of ascetical discipline, of divine vision, and of the lives of the saints, although you may not sense the sweetness of this at once, due to darkness caused by recollections of things close at hand. And when you stand up to pray and to say your rule of prayer, instead of thinking of what you have seen and heard in the world, you will find yourself pondering the divine Scriptures you have read, and this medication will make you forget worldly things.”²

Concerning places, there are certain places that God has reserved to be holy more than others, like the church. Our behavior in church should be different than outside the church; in church it is not proper to speak for we are in the presence of holiness, as it says, “Holiness adorns Your house, O Lord, forever” (Ps. 93:5). Neither is it proper to drink nor eat nor to be distracted with other matters. I recall when we were young children, we would hear the priests advise the people not to enter the church with their newspapers; this was to avoid being distracted by unintentionally glancing over to the headlines. It is the same for us today—perhaps it is not newspapers we bring into church but our phones which offer multiple sources of

¹ Isaac the Syrian (2011) *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*. Boston, MA: Holy Transfiguration Monastery. P.77

² Isaac the Syrian (2011) *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*. Boston, MA: Holy Transfiguration Monastery. P.36

distractions, or simply matters to be discussed with others during a time of prayer. The center of our worship is God, and for this reason all prayers in church face the east. However sometimes we are distracted by one another and desire to stand by one certain people. This is not right. There should be a distinction between what is holy and was it not—a time of prayer is a time of prayer.

Concerning people, God has differentiated between the believers and non-believers and those who have consecrated themselves to Him, like the Nazirites. Monks and nuns should behave in ways that differ from the rest of the world. Their behavior should be of a higher degree than that of the rest of the world. What may be acceptable to the rest of the people may not necessarily be acceptable to those consecrated to the Lord. The common argument when rebuked for misconduct is often, “what is wrong with this?” There may not be anything wrong with the action per se, but perhaps it is not fitting to one consecrated to God. In first epistle to Timothy we read the required conduct of bishops and deacons, in Leviticus the proper conduct of priests, in Numbers the law for the Nazarite. As responsibilities increase so do our requirements to be faithful to holy things.

We need to understand the concept of distinguishing between holy and unholy with regards to time, place and people. What may be acceptable and fitting in the world is not necessarily what is acceptable and fitting to my calling. Remember your vows, search through the Holy Scriptures, read as many stories of the saints as you can and know what is asked of you.

May the peace and love of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

Glory be to God forever. Amen.