



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

Monthly Message for the Monastic

February 2020

My very dear sons and daughters,

Remember that famous dispute that the disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ once had on the road? Believing that our Lord Jesus Christ was an earthly king who had come to restore the Kingdom of David, the disciples once debated who was the closest to our Lord and who would be the greatest in His kingdom. When our Lord Jesus Christ asked, “What was it you disputed among yourselves on the road?” (Mark 9:33) they were too embarrassed to reply and so, knowing their hearts, He said to them, “If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all” (Mark 9:35). Our Lord Jesus Christ said this in order to teach them and us the two principles required to reach true greatness in the true Kingdom.

How can we properly apply the first principle — being last of all? We can begin by placing others before ourselves — in need and in honor — but especially in honor. We should forbid ourselves any privileges and not allow ourselves to be treated differently nor have any exceptions. We learn from St. John the Baptist who, although he was known as a great prophet, responded with humility when his disciples came to him and told him that Jesus was baptizing and that all were going to Him; he replied with these beautiful words “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30).

We can also learn to have humble hearts. Why do we have conflict in the community? It is because everyone desires to be first — to be the greatest in this earthly life. Everyone feels that their way and opinion is the right one and refuses to willingly submit or to place others ahead of themselves. St. Isaac the Syrian says, “But they for whom the world still lives cannot submit to injustice: either — moved by vainglory — they are provoked to anger and are troubled, being stirred up in the manner of brutes, or else they are overcome by grief. O how difficult it is to attain this virtue (i.e. to be forbearing while being wronged), and how much glory it procures from God! He who would attain to this virtue must depart from his kinsmen and live the life of a stranger,

for he cannot attain it in his homeland.”¹ If this applies to those who are accused falsely, then what about us who simply have to submit to another person’s opinion?

St. Isaac goes on to say, “As grace accompanies humility, so do painful incidents accompany pride. The eyes of the Lord are upon the humble to make them glad; but the face of the Lord is against the proud to make them humble.”² “God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (1 Pet. 5:5). Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Creator of all, submitted not only to earthly parents but to government authority — what are we to say about ourselves who can do neither of these things?

Some people can fake all of this and pretend that they are last outwardly but from within they feel something completely different. To truly feel last of all is a real internal feeling and manifests naturally in our behavior and conduct. A person who truly sees themselves as last knows that they are but dust and ashes and that anything good in them is due only to the grace of God. If we don’t have this feeling internally then we are not walking in the way of greatness. If you want to be great in the kingdom of God you need to follow the first principle.

The second principle is to be the servant of all and we can discuss four conditions to attaining this. First, we should be quick to help others even when they don’t ask but when you feel inside of you the desire that you should help. When Archangel Gabriel told St. Mary that Elizabeth was six months pregnant, she quickly went to serve her. Although Elizabeth was hiding her pregnancy and St. Mary could have excused herself from service and said, “no one told me. She doesn’t know I know. Why should I offer to help?” she went anyway and went “with haste” (Luke 1:39). St. Mary was 3 months pregnant at the time and it is known that these are the most difficult months but, putting herself last, she went rushing to the mountains to serve her cousin — this is the heart of a true servant.

Secondly, we should serve with humility. The Bible tells us that St. Mary returned to her house before the birth of St. John the Baptist, why? Because many people came at this time to help Elizabeth. St. Mary went to serve, not to show off in front of people and so she served in secret (and God rewarded her openly). Sometimes when we serve, we want to make it public so that others could know and praise our good work.

Thirdly, sometimes when we serve, we like to do so with prominent people. What about everyone else? Do we want to serve everyone just as quickly and joyfully or just those with important status? When we serve a prominent person, perhaps we receive a type of reward through a form of satisfaction but what about serving people who cannot repay us? (Luke 14:13-14). If I have a heart of a servant I will serve everyone equally willingly regardless of status.

¹ Isaac the Syrian (2011) *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*. Boston, MA: Holy Transfiguration Monastery. P.50

² Isaac the Syrian (2011) *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*. Boston, MA: Holy Transfiguration Monastery. P.50

Fourthly, we should be willing to sacrifice ourselves for service — sometimes we are not willing to sacrifice ourselves and do not want to go the extra mile. The second mile is called the “Mile of Love” because if I walk only the first mile it is because I am compelled to but if I go the second then I am going out of my own will and desire — out of love.

The second mile requires us to give more than just the bare minimum. Some of us live with the principle of “minimum requirement” — always wanting to know what the minimum expectations are in order to meet just that and nothing more. What is the minimum in prayer? In going to church? In fasting? What are the minimum requirements so I can go to heaven? This is not the spirit of the servant — the spirit of the servant gives without reservation in serving God and others. This service should come from a loving heart – a heart that loves God and loves the brethren and because of this serves others with pleasure and with joy — not with complaining or grumbling — with such sacrifices God is pleased.

Even in the secular world when they speak about the different styles of leadership, they mention “Servant Leadership” as the best kind. Servant Leadership as opposed to Authoritarian Leadership and other forms of leadership, is one where the leader prioritizes the needs of their team and encourages collective decision-making. Our Lord Jesus Christ served everyone without discrimination. “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve,” (Mark 10:45). Sometimes when we acquire a certain position, we expect people to serve us and when this doesn’t happen we get disappointed but the two principles apply to all — servant and master.

To be the last of all means that we don’t ask for exceptions or privileges and that we put others before myself — especially in honor and I will be obedient and submissive. If we resistant and rebellions, this is because of our pride and God resists the proud. By placing others before ourselves and having humble hearts, we will be free of judgmental thoughts and conflict. When we feel that we are last of all then we feel that others are better than us and that the all good things come only from above.

The Church does not encourage low self-esteem but encourages humbleness — I know that I am nothing but “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:13). If I know that I am nothing then I will never place myself above others and I will accept and endure the weaknesses of others, knowing my own weaknesses well — perhaps they are weak in certain points but stronger than me in others.

Our Lord Jesus Christ showed us the way to true greatness. Many people don’t understand this, but the Lord told us that if you want to be first in the Kingdom of God, apply these two principles — be the last of all and servant of all.

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

Glory be to God forever. Amen.