



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

Monthly Questions and Answers February 2020

Q43: How sensitive does one need to be around another person's weaknesses and how many excuses should we give?

A43: Seventy multiplied by seven - that's what the Lord said. How patient? I need to be very patient. How sensitive? I give them the benefit of the doubt and I need to remember that I have my own weaknesses and I am struggling with them. The golden rule is "just as you want men to do to you, you also do to them likewise".

However, it could happen — specifically with novices — that if I see that their weakness is hindering them from growth in the monastic path, after I have examined my heart and intentions, I could share the concern. Sometimes, after someone has been consecrated, they discover this is not their way and they feel stuck — I have shared many times before that a monk is either the happiest person in the world or the most miserable. If my goal is not clear from the beginning, then the monastery will be to me like a prison. I can begin with joy — desiring to wear the back robe — but it won't end well. I have always said that if you want to manipulate the system to wear the black robe, you will succeed, but it is you who will suffer. You will eventually be living in a prison of your own doing.

Q44: How should we make use of our spiritual gifts without others mistaking it as showing off and without, we ourselves, falling into pride?

A44: Let's say my gift is in hymns — this probably being the gift which is most easily mistaken as one showing off and also in which one could easily fall into pride. So in this case, how does one keep the proper balance and both praise God and glorify Him with this gift but also take care not to show off?

Well, first I would like to distinguish between a gift of the spirit and the fruit of the spirit — what will get you into heaven is the fruit, not the gift. For this reason, St. Paul said, “Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.” (1Corinthians 13:1-3).

Speaking in tongues, having all knowledge, moving mountains... even “giving my body to be burned” and serving this person, serving that person, serving and serving all to be a man-pleaser, these are all but gifts, but love is a fruit of the spirit. So, we can show off all we want with our gifts, but in the end, we will lose heaven. We need to strive for the better way as St. Paul said, “eagerly desire the greater gifts. And yet I will show you the most excellent way”, which is the way of love (1Corinthians 12:31).

To keep the proper balance, one must examine their intention. For instance, let's say I am attending a meeting and I feel that there is knowledge I want to share, I need to ask myself: why. Why do I want to speak? Do I want to speak so I could impress others and so that others can feel that I have understanding? Or do I want to share because my intention is truly for everyone, and myself, to benefit?

Another example is in church, let's say I want to say a hymn — is it because I want to praise God, or is it because I want to impress everyone with a hymn that no one else knows?

In the kitchen, I may want to make a special dish, why? Is it because I want to offer something special to the community out of love, or is it, again, to impress others?

Self-examination and being honest with ourselves is very important — why am I using this gift? What is my motive? What is my intention? “For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him?” (1Corinthians 2:11). You can defend yourself and say, “no I didn't do this for this and that reason” but, when you search your heart, you will always know the real intention to why you've done the things you've done and by these means and by the grace of God, you will be able to keep the proper balance.

Q45: People make comments about others and share their personal opinions about them — how do I prevent these from influencing my thoughts?

A45: This requires discernment. If I feel that I am negatively affected by the words of others, perhaps I need to set a boundary.

For instance, it could happen that someone newly enters the monastic life and views all others as being saints... then one of their brothers or sisters approaches them and "warns" them to be aware of certain others — "be careful this father is this way and this mother is that way" and continues with a long list of comments which stumbles and negatively impacts the newcomer.

Believe me, when I ordain a priest it is very rare that I share my personal experiences with the congregation; perhaps I may have had a certain experience with a specific individual but by sharing this I could negatively affect the newly ordained priest which would then approach this person with this idea in his mind.

Pope Shenouda had given me advice before I joined the monastery and said to me, "believe what your eyes see and not what your ears hear". This was great advice and in any case, when I entered, no one ever shared such things with me nor warned me to be careful of so and so brother or monk.

If someone is filling my ears with words and it is negatively affecting me, I may ask them to stop — "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).

Q46: How can one know that I am not taking my monastic life seriously?

A46: Pay attention to your attitude towards the monastic rules — for instance I have a canon, am I ignoring it? Do I abide by the decisions that the monastery/convent establish even if they don't make sense to me? Let's say it's Holy Week and the monastery/convent decides that we will only prepare one type of meal, do I then make my own arrangements to get snacks and other types of food? Something is mandatory, do I find an excuse to get out of it?

Ask yourself to what extent you are serious in respecting the rules & guidelines of the monastery/convent and you will see how serious you are taking this life.