



## **Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States**

### **Monthly Message for the Monastic**

**March 2020**

My very dear sons and daughters,

As we begin the glorious Great Fast, I would like to talk to you about joy. Not the earthly joy but the heavenly one that comes from above and resides within. I see three factors in accessing this heavenly joy and three sources from where it comes — of the factors we have understanding that joy does not mean a life without tribulation, believing in the promise that our sorrow will turn into joy and knowing that no one can take this joy away from us — of the sources we have prayer and experiencing the presence of God and the love of the Father. Through these factors and sources we should have hope knowing that our Lord Jesus Christ overcame the world and through Him, we shall find victory in all sorrow.

Our Lord Jesus Christ said, “In the world you will have tribulation” (John 16:33) — many of us do not understand this fact and believe that if we are righteous and live the correct monastic life then we should not suffer. This is because we perceive suffering to be a consequence of sin — yes, sin came into the world through Adam and Eve’s disobedience, but this does not create a sure cause and effect in relation to sin and suffering.

Remember the man who was born blind? The disciples asked our Lord Jesus Christ, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him.’” (John 9:2-3). Sometimes suffering is a result of our sin, but many times it is for the glory of God and our salvation. If we accept our suffering as dying daily for the sake of permitting our Creator to mold us into what He designed us to be then we will be joyful. “Joy arising from voluntary endurance of calumny and injustice exalts the heart. They for whom the world is dead submit to contumelies with joy. 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.”<sup>1</sup>

At the time of sorrow, we must remember and have hope that our sorrow will turn into joy. Either here on earth or in eternal life. In a recent book released called, *A Silent*

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<sup>1</sup> Isaac the Syrian (2011) *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*. Boston, MA: Holy Transfiguration Monastery. P.49

*Patriarch* the author writes of a period of time where His Holiness Pope Kyrillos — still Father Mina — suffered greatly in body, soul and spirit, living as a hermit for three years in the desert. However, having endured this tribulation, it was written that Fr. Mina “saw the light.” Regarding this point, it is quoted, “If we read the letter in the wider context of monastic experience, and solitude in particular, many Fathers describe a period of intense struggle or ‘purification’ that is followed by the state of *theoria*, or ‘illumination’ culminating in ‘perfection.’ These three stages are well attested in the monastic and patristic literature and become intensely relevant when we consider the life of his [His Holiness Pope Kyrillos] much beloved St. Menas. After years of ascetic struggle in the desert, St. Menas had remarkably similar epiphany: “He dwelt for many days in the great privation . . . and after a time the grace of God *lighted upon him*, and he saw heaven open.”<sup>2</sup> The children of God, while they suffer here on earth, actually experience joy in the time of suffering because Christian joy comes from within not from without.

Have faith and know that nobody can take this joy away from you. Our Lord Jesus Christ said, “Therefore you now have sorrow; but I will see you again and your heart will rejoice, and your joy no one will take from you.” (John 16:22). This is the major difference between the temporal earthly joy and the joy that is from the fruit of the Spirit. The joy that comes from the fruit of the Spirit comes from within and comes from the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and Holy Trinity in our hearts. It is this joy that was with St. Paul and St. Silas when in prison; that was with St. Peter when he fell into a deep sleep while he was in prison awaiting his execution the following day; with Daniel in the lion’s den and with the three saintly youth in the fiery furnace. No one can take your joy away from you. No one. Because this joy comes from heaven and from the Holy Spirit which dwells in you.

What are the sources of this joy? The Lord mentioned several. One of them is prayer. As the Lord said, “Until now you have asked nothing in My name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.” (John 16:24). Praying in the name of Christ brings joy to our hearts because when we stand before God we receive from His grace, His peace and His joy. St. Paul asked God three times to remove the thorn from his flesh and each time God said, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” (2 Cor. 12:9). Perhaps God was protecting him from pride. Maybe if he was healed, he would have relied on himself and not on God. From this realization, St. Paul said, “Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.” (2 Cor. 12:9). When we realize we are weak we will rely on His grace and His power will work its perfection in us. Therefore, regardless of the answer to our prayer — whether it be yes or no or not now — we are joyful.

A further source of joy is the realization of the presence of God with us. When feeling God’s presence, we rejoice because we know that if God is with us, no one can be against us. I know that, without exception, God will make all things work for good to those who love Him. I believe His promise that says, do not fear “I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20). The presence of God always brings joy to our hearts.

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<sup>2</sup> Fanous, Rev. Dr. Daniel (2019) *A Silent Patriarch: Kyrillos VI: Life and Legacy*. Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press. P.99

Finally, another source of joy is the love of God the Father towards us. As our Lord Jesus Christ said “for the Father Himself loves you, because you have loved Me, and have believed that I came forth from God. (John 16:27). I would like to emphasize that one of the main goals of the incarnation of the Son of God is that we develop a relationship with the Father. Our Lord Jesus Christ reconciled us with the Father on the cross and wants us to have a child-father relationship with the Father and address the Father in our prayer as “Our Father who art in heaven...”

One of the requirements of discipleship is to carry our cross and follow our Master and this means we will suffer. Did not St. Paul say, “Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.”? (2 Tim. 3:12). But never forget that our Lord Jesus Christ has overcome the world. His victory is our victory when we abide in Him and He in us. He in us will defeat the world, He in us will defeat Satan, He in us will abolish the power of death. So when we abide in Him and He in us then Satan and the world will have no power over us.

Yes, there one aspect of this journey is that we will suffer but the other is that this suffering will turn into joy — a permanent joy — and no one will be able to take this away from us. Let us glorify Him and praise Him that He turned everything to be to our benefit. He turned sorrow and tribulation and hardship into our joy.

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

Glory be to God forever. Amen.