



## Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

### Monthly Message for the Monastic

May 2020

My dear beloved children,

Christ is Risen! Truly He is Risen!

The Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ makes me think of the hope that, as children of God, we always have in our Heavenly Father. The narrow path is not easy to tread and difficult times come, as promised (Sir. 2:1), but to these we respond, *“Do not rejoice over me, my enemy; when I fall, I will arise; when I sit in darkness, the Lord will be a light to me”* (Mic. 7:8) and we humbly get back up and pick up our cross. Many monastics begin their path with zeal and fervor and after some time they discover that their flame has gone out, either spiritually, emotionally, or mentally. They discover that the things that never used to bother them have now become major issues and that their general feelings have become lukewarm. The causes of this are several but the remedies are readily available. Once we discover the issue and the stumbling blocks in the way of our healing, by the will and grace of God, victory is not far from reach.

Some of the causes of becoming lukewarm may stem from the reality of living in a closed community, especially if the community suffers from negative behaviors. It is said that “a monk is a thought”, meaning that his main battles are with his thoughts; living in a closed community where one interacts with the same group of people within the same space, can create shallow thoughts or stubbornness in a certain school of thought to the point of even developing psychosomatic reactions. Another may be because of the monastic’s lack of experience with external and internal trials — those that come from the community and those that come from the devil.

In addition, lukewarmness may come from having chosen the monastic path for the wrong reasons, without first counting the cost (Luke 14:28) or understanding the truth of monasticism. Many times I have said that there is a difference between monastics living in a monastery and a society of brothers/sisters. One may want to live in the monastery but not die to the world. They may seek the monastic life as a lifestyle, but not strive to be obedient nor live in poverty. They may want to live in the monastery but have little care for the vow of chastity or staying away from

laypeople. Or perhaps they joined for the right reasons but lost sight of the goal and began to simply eat, sleep, and live a routine schedule. In both cases, the feeling of being lukewarm will come quickly.

Concerning the remedies, before we address them, I would like to mention certain stumbling blocks in the way — sometimes medicine does not provide a cure because there are other illnesses that first need to be taken care of in order for the medicine to have full effect. Being “*dull of hearing*” (Heb. 5:11) due to a desire for a certain sin (Judg. 16:4) is one of those illnesses. As well as hardness of heart due to unhealthy attachments (Luke 18:23) and sensitivity to the truth (2 Tim 4:3-4) — some do not like to be criticized even for their good.

Furthermore, St. Paul speaks of three types of people— the carnal man, the natural man, and the spiritual man. The carnal man is still a child in Christ and argues over trifling matters (1 Cor. 3:1-3). The natural man is one who is without the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 2:14) and considers spiritual matters to be foolishness. The spiritual man, however, has the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:15-16) and can discern what is good and evil. Neither the carnal nor the natural man can understand the things given by God (Heb. 5:12-14), nor the value of monasticism, nor its sublimity. They hear what is right but they walk according to their own will and desires.

Having then identified and removed the stumbling blocks, a monastic can then target the problem. So, how do we solve the issue of being lukewarm? One needs to become spiritually minded. The spiritually minded monastic, the ideal monastic, walks the path of the saints and follows the commandments of God. This monastic lives a life of self-denial, following Christ and carrying his/her cross daily (Matt. 16:24) and rises even above the spiritually mature, to the level of perfection. So, what shall we do to seek the spiritual man within us and avoid being lukewarm?

1. Focus on the goal: I once read that the devil fights the man with the opposite of his calling. To the monks he fights him with service and to those serving, he fights them with the thought of monasticism. This he does in order to shake him and distract him from his goal.
2. Revelation of thought and discipleship: St. John Climacus spoke of carefully choosing your spiritual father and not doubting him. The devil can convince me not to share all my thoughts, but the more I hide my thoughts, the more I am a victim of the works of the devil. Had Judas revealed his thoughts, I am certain, that he would have been saved.
3. Monastic discipline: “*Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace*” (Jam. 3:18). If we want to grow the fruit of righteousness [ideal monastics], the earth [monastery/convent] must be peaceful and the sower a peacemaker [those in positions of authority].
4. Foundation in church services: liturgies and praises. One who becomes lazy towards prayers will become lukewarm quickly.
5. Life in the cell: St. Moses said, “*sit in your cell and your cell will teach you everything.*” One who protects his senses and knows how to sit in his cell and loves his cell will not become lukewarm.

6. The life of the community: We grow by means of the community as it teaches us virtues of service, love, forgiveness, longsuffering, endurance, humility... The community reveals our weaknesses of anger, pride, and envy... In the Holy Bible, I once counted how many times there is a reference to "*one another*" and I found more than fifty commandments relating to others. One who distances himself/herself from the communal life, will grow lukewarm.
7. Work with a spiritual mind: Work in order to grow spiritually but not work for the work itself.

The beginner's zeal is a beautiful thing indeed, but greater than this is to maintain that zeal, by the grace of God. It is important to broaden one's mind and seek for spiritual things in order not to be affected by the environment in a negative way. One should never lose hope but strive daily to follow the commandments of God and to be transformed into the image of God, which is the path of perfection.