



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

Monthly Questions and Answers May 2020

Q 55: What is true love in the community?

A 55: True love is to step outside of my ego and to think of the other person. I recall that His Holiness Pope Shenouda once gave a talk on not seeking our own comfort at the cost of another's and I believe that this is true love in the community.

Often, we are deceived to think that our self-centered behavior is spiritual but many times the truth is that I am thinking of my own comfort rather than that of my brother/sister. I rather go to my cell than help someone in need.

St. Isaac the Syrian said, "If, however, a man lives in society of men and his dwelling is near to them and he is comforted by the labors of other men, whether at a time of sickness or of health, then he must render the same service; but he should not by any means ask others for such comfort. And if he should see a son of the same flesh as his own, who shares the same likeness, to be in straitness, yea rather Christ Himself, outcast and belabored, and he should flee and hide himself from him, pretending to practice a sham stillness, then he, and those like him, are without mercy."

Bishop Raphael once spoke of how a monk in the monastery should place the burden on himself so not to trouble his brother rather than trouble his brother to lighten his own burden. Many times, however, we put our own comfort first. I could request an exception for certain things, thinking of my own desires, not considering the comfort of the community.

I remember when a few of us were responsible for the kitchen in the Sourian Monastery and Bishop Hedra was visiting, Fr. Tomas told me to deliver the food to the Bishop and instructed me that if I should not find His Grace then, every now and then, I should knock on his door until he arrives. We were on the first floor and the Bishop's cell was on the third. So every fifteen minutes or so I would take the tray of food and knock to see if His Grace had returned. I did this until about 11:30PM and when I finally found His Grace he hadn't any need for dinner. I simply returned the food without being troubled and took the blessing because this was both my service and my obedience. Once it got late, I could have simply left the tray of food in front of the door, or I could have assumed that His Grace probably already ate, but Fr. Tomas said that I should keep going to him until I serve him personally, and so this is what I took the blessing of doing.

Another story I remember from the Desert Fathers, is when Abba Pachomius was walking and one of the younger monks came to carry his bag but Abba Pachomius refused and told the monk that monasteries are not flourishing because the senior monks are enslaving the younger monks.

Of course this doesn't mean that I forego all my prayers so I can serve in anything and everything — there is wisdom and discretion needed but I would like to note that most of our time is wasted in idle talking, not in helping one another.

Q 56: Your Grace often tells us “whatever you all agree on, is okay with me” but let’s say we all agree on something but one person is very against it — shall we continue discussing until we all come to a consensus or do we go with the majority?

A 56: The minority needs to submit to the decision of the majority — this is proper monastic behavior. Also, in discussions I always say that we should not try to convince the other person of our opinion but that we should simply share our view and obey whatever the final decision ends up being. If we do not do this, it will eventually lead to an argument or at least one person being upset or dissatisfied.

If someone does not want to submit they will never learn proper monasticism as St. Synclitica said, “As long as we are in the monastery, obedience is preferable to asceticism. The one teaches pride, the other humility.”

Q 57: What is the purpose of boundaries and the goal of removing them?

A 57: I want to clarify something in regards to boundaries – when we teach someone boundaries it is to set certain limits in relation to others, not in order to avoid serving them.

Let's say someone asks you for a favor and you go and help but you do this only because you're embarrassed to say no, then you are only outwardly serving but internally you are irritated and unhappy. This is not a true service because you did it out of weakness and you will return to your cell grumbling and feeling that you were used because of your kindness.

The one who does not know how to say no, needs to learn how to set boundaries and to understand the proper time for things. Someone may ask them something at the wrong time — like a request for something unnecessary during liturgy — and they will leave the church and do it but by doing this, they obey man more than God. This person needs to learn boundaries.

However, for the one who is capable of setting limits, this does not mean they should permit themselves to behave in selfish ways. The Bible tells us that, 'whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two" (Matt. 5:41) and therefore we should serve one another. For these their service is by their will and done with internal joy.

Issues occur when someone remains in the second stage — learning to set boundaries and then becomes selfish in their motives. The correct way is to move on from saying yes as a weakness to saying yes by your will to fulfill the commandments of God.

Q 58: How can I overcome laziness?

A 58: There is a virtue called enforcement. The Holy Scriptures says, “the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force.” (Matt 11:12) Force does not meaning violence, of course, but that we need to force ourselves in our spiritual lives. There are two things that can help in this:

1. Encouragement and Motivation:

One can have a spiritual friend or guide who helps encourage them or keeps them accountable. For instance someone may follow up with me if I didn't attend Liturgy one day or if I seem to be slacking in my obedience or prayers.

2. Another method of motivation is by using a schedule:

one can keep themselves accountable by using a schedule with a breakdown of their prayers and spiritual exercises and present it in your confessions. Actually this is a beautiful idea that I wish all of you would do — many have shared with me that this has helped them remain consistent. When using this schedule and after discussing with your Spiritual Father, you can add certain consequences for yourself if you do not meet certain standards. For example, you can deprive yourself of a certain comfort if you were lazy in completing a spiritual exercise. I would like to mention that if you have the thought that your motivation is wrong — that you are only completing the exercise in order not to receive the “punishment” this is actually okay at the beginning. Fr. Matteous used to tell us that we only just need to get the wheel rolling at the beginning, which is the more difficult part, and we will gain momentum later on.