



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

Monthly Message for the Monastic

June 2020

My dear sons and daughters,

Abba John used to say, “We relinquish a light burden when we condemn ourselves, but we take upon ourselves a heavy burden when we attempt to make ourselves righteous.”¹

Recall when James and John went to Jesus Christ and asked Him if they can sit at either side of Him on His earthly throne? Of course this request came from a spirit of pride; considering themselves to be especially close to our Lord they assumed they would not be refused a request to be elevated above everyone else. After replying to them with a question in order for them to understand what is actually required to attain to the Kingdom, He then denied their request. Even still, the ten others became jealous and displeased. So, the Lord found this to be a good opportunity to teach them all a lesson in humility.

Our Lord Jesus Christ said to them, “*You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave— just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many*” (Matt. 20:25-28).

On one hand, the society in which we were raised teaches pride and self-actualization and how to stand out and be first, but on the other, our leaving the world and joining the monastic life represents a death to all this... so does this mean we are automatically free from the sin of pride and ready to serve in all humility as soon as we join the monastery/convent? Not exactly. We know that renunciation and exile are only just the beginning steps of the way and that true death to the world is a journey of daily self-denial, so what do we do in the meantime? How can we die to the world and live humbly in the monastic community having come from a competitive society that teaches us to be first in everything?

¹ *The Paradise of the Holy Fathers – Volume II*, Wallis, Budge E. A. trans. (Australia: New South Wales: St Shenouda Coptic Orthodox Monastery, 2008), p.124.

First we need to acknowledge our weaknesses — “An old man used to say, ‘I would rather learn than teach’”² So, ask yourself if you are more comfortable being obedient or obeyed; more comfortable controlling situations or receiving the ideas of others? A humble person does not argue a lot but can be easily submissive to those who are in authority. We like that others submit to us but we struggle submitting to others and this reflects the heart of an arrogant person. We also need to examine our hearts in relation to judging others for the humble person does not judge even when they see the weaknesses of others because they realize the extent of their own weaknesses. Pay attention to your reactions and ask yourself if you are quick to forgive, for the humble person forgives and forgets without the awaited apology and they endure and accept being hurt knowing that God is their healer. A humble person will be content with the last seat and would be happy to see others honored before and above them. Many times we become angry or jealous when we are not chosen to serve in specific things — this is not a humble spirit.

“He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30) very powerful words reflecting a very humble heart. A humble person escapes from receiving honor and glory because they know that whatever success they have in this life is not from them, it is from God who is the source of success and prosperity. This is why when people honor or praise them they give glory to God alone.

In order to acquire this beautiful virtue of humility we need to supplicate God to give us this spirit and remind ourselves continuously of our weaknesses and sins and we should hold ourselves accountable every time we act in an arrogant way. Read a lot about humility and search the scriptures for the same. Seek out the lessons concerning this virtue and practice them. The points that I mentioned above — serving, not judging, accepting the last seat, escaping honor and glory, being submissive, accepting the opinions of others... we need to train ourselves in all these spiritual exercises. We need to grow and train ourselves to be humble. Maybe when practicing what is humble we will not feel at ease yet in our hearts but with perseverance God will see our struggle and He will transfer the will of humility to a true humility of the heart.

Finally I would like to make a distinction between humility and inferiority — the one suffering from inferiority feels that they are a failure and cannot be successful in anything but the humble person is totally different — the humble person knows that they are nothing but this does not come from low self esteem but with confidence knowing that they *“can do all things through Christ who strengthens”* them (Phil. 4:13). They know that they can be successful but that this comes from Christ who abides in them and strengthens them.

Let us make a commitment to train ourselves in humility and ask the grace of God to help us.

May the peace and love of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Glory be to God forever. Amen.

² *The Paradise of the Holy Fathers – Volume II*, Wallis, Budge E. A. trans. (Australia: New South Wales: St Shenouda Coptic Orthodox Monastery, 2008), p.128.