



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

Monthly Message for the Monastic

August 2020

My dear sons and daughters,

An excerpt from the preface of one of my favorite books – *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*:

“There is only one way out of this, namely, total separation from all the world. But withdrawal from the world does not mean physical removal from it. Rather, it is the withdrawal by the soul of any sympathy for the body. One becomes stateless and homeless. One gives up possessions, friends, ownership of property, livelihood, business connections, social life and scholarship. The heart is made ready to receive the imprint of sacred teaching, and this making ready involves the unlearning of knowledge deriving from evil habits. To write on wax, one has first to erase the letters previously written there, and to bring sacred teaching to the soul one must begin by wiping out preoccupations rooted in ordinary habits.” (Basil, Letter 2)

Men become monks “either for the sake of the coming kingdom, or because of the number of their sins, or on account of their love of God” (Step 1). But once inside the walls, the monk, according to John, has to live under the scrutiny of a God Who is undoubtedly loving, merciful, and omnipotent, but Who is also just, stern, and conscious of protocol.”

If we were to live our monastic life without the conscious battle between the flesh and the spirit, then are we living anything more than a simple life away from the responsibilities of the world? How many of us are truly monks and nuns and how many of are just dressed that way?

You know that amazing grace that starts you off at the beginning of your path and dwindles as time progresses? At the beginning you have this beginner’s zeal which makes you want to apply every ascetic practice and every virtuous rule you read about in the history of the Desert Fathers; you feel like no one could possibly love God more than you do and that sanctity is not far off. Then, as you keep walking the narrow path you encounter those trials spoken of in Sirach and you discover who you really are more and more as you learn the depth and breadth of your weaknesses and ego.

Perhaps at the beginning you thought you could be a martyr for Christ, but later you discover that you could barely deny yourself in simple acts of obedience let alone deny yourself of your very life.

So, as you begin to discover your wretched state, you learn who you are and, in turn, learn who God really is. You thought you loved Him more than anyone to only discover your faith is actually in its beginning stages. Did that beginner's zeal reveal the true devotion you have to this life and to the vows you made to God? Do you really love God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind (Matt. 22:37)? Do you really trust God more than your own understanding (Prov. 3:5)? Do you really trust that His plans for you are greater than the ones you have for yourself (Jer. 29:11)?

They say that stressful situations reveal the "true" self – well in this case, the arid stages of spiritual life do the same. Are you fighting the battle against the flesh and putting all your trust in God or are you simply going through the motions of the carnal life – looking for pleasures and distractions, judging and complaining, eating and sleeping and doing everything according to the desires of your will?

Sometimes we complicate things a lot more than they need to be and we allow our thoughts to carry us to far, negative and dark places but in reality it is really a simple examination of the self – do I have the monastic mind or do I have the carnal mind? Do I love God and am willing to give up the things I hold on to, for His sake, or do I love myself too much? Do I behave in ways fitting to an ascetic who has consecrated their life to God or do I search for my own comforts and pleasures? Do the loving and self-sacrificing ways of the Desert Fathers seem far removed or are they something I imitate?

Perhaps right now you are not able to give as you were able to in the beginning but that does not mean you cannot give all that you have. Follow God's commandments and have hope that through this both your knowledge of Him, your love for Him and your faith in Him will grow.

Be strong in the Lord.

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

Glory be to God forever. Amen.