



## Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States Monthly Message for the Monastic

March 2021

### Denying Ourselves

**“For blessed is the Wood through which justice is made.”<sup>1</sup>**

“As for You, the crucified One who looks down from the heights of Golgotha, Your dignity and majesty far exceeds that of a thousand kings seated on a thousand thrones in a thousand kingdoms, though You hang from a cross steeped in Your blood. You are more fearsome and formidable than a thousand commanders leading a thousand armies on a thousand battles, even in those last moments before Your death. You are more joyful in Your grief than the spring with its abundant flowers. In Your suffering, You are more serene than the angels in their heavens are. You are freer in the hands of Your abusers than the radiance of the Sun. The crown of thorns on Your head is more majestic and beautiful than a bejeweled royal crown and the nail in Your hand more precious than a royal scepter. The drops of blood on Your feet are more brilliant than the jewels of Ashtoreth”.<sup>2</sup>

Many of us seek God and ask where can we find Him? I’ll tell you where to find Him, you can find Him at the foot of His cross. He has fastened His holy hands and feet with nails not just nails but He consented to be tied by ropes on the cross. So, my soul whenever you need Him, He is there on the cross come down and kneel before Him in humility so that He may wash you with His holy blood. The monastic life is a daily cross, monks or as we call them (Cross-Bearers) are daily crucifying themselves. Just as St. Paul said to the Galatians “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.” (Galatians 2:20). But before the cross there is the most essential appeal which is denying ourselves as our Lord said “Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny

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<sup>1</sup> (Wisdom 14:7)

<sup>2</sup> Fr. Manasseh Youhanna. The Crucified Jesus. St Shenouda Monastery. Chapter 6, P. 80

himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? (Mark 8:34-37)

“Truly, the greatest knowledge is the knowledge of the will of God, the greatest valor is submission to it and the greatest vocation is its accomplishment.”<sup>3</sup> The fathers called it “self-persecution” the fathers say it’s the most difficult task, but with God’s help it is possible “NAKED, small and helpless, you now pass on to the most difficult of all human tasks: to conquer your own selfish desires. Ultimately it is just this "self-persecution" on which your warfare depends, for as long as your selfish will rules, you cannot pray to the Lord with a pure heart: Thy will be done. If you cannot get rid of your own greatness, neither can you lay yourself open for real greatness. If you cling to your own freedom, you cannot share in true freedom, where only one will reigns. The saints' deep secret is this: do not seek freedom, and freedom will be given you. The earth brings forth thorns and thistles, it is said. By the sweat of his brow, with anguish shall man till it; it is he himself, his own substance. The holy Fathers' counsel is to begin with small things, for, says Ephraim the Syrian, how can you put out a great fire before you have learned to quench a small one? If you wish to set yourself free from a great suffering, crush the small desires, say the holy Fathers. Do not suppose that the one can be separated from the others: they all hang together like a long chain or a net. Thus it does not pay to come to grips with the hard-to-master great vices and bad habits you have acquired without at the same time overcoming your small "innocent" weaknesses: your taste for sweets, your urge to talk, your curiosity, your meddling. For, finally, all our desires, great and small, are built on the same foundation, our unchecked habit of satisfying only our own will. It is the life of our will that is destroyed. Since the Fall the will has been running errands exclusively for its own ego. For this reason, our warfare is directed against the life of self-will as such. And it should be undertaken without delay or wearying. If you have the urge to ask something, don't ask! If you have the urge to drink two cups of coffee, drink only one! If you have the urge to look at the clock, don't look! If you wish to smoke a cigarette, refrain! If you want to go visiting, stay at home! This is self-persecution; in this way does one silence, with God's help, one's loud-voiced will. You are perhaps wondering, is this really necessary? The holy Fathers reply with another question: Do you really think that you can fill a jar with clean water before the old, dirty water has been emptied out? Or do you wish to receive a beloved guest in a room

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<sup>3</sup> Fr. Manasseh Youhanna. The Crucified Jesus. St Shenouda Monastery. Chapter 1, P. 23

crammed with old trash and junk? No; he who hopes to see the Lord as he is, purifies himself, says the apostle John (I John 3:3). Thus, let us purify our heart! Let us throw out all the dusty trash that is stored there; let us scrub the dirty floor, wash the windows and open them, in order that light and air may come into the room we are preparing as a sanctuary for the Lord. Then let us put on clean garments, so that the old musty smell may not cling to us and we find ourselves thrust out (Luke 13:28). May all this be our daily and hourly travail. In this way we are only doing what the Lord Himself commanded us through His holy apostle James, who says: Purify your hearts (4:8). And the apostle Paul instructs us to cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit (II Corinthians). For from within, says Christ, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within and defile the man (Mark 7:21-3). Therefore, He also exhorts the Pharisees: Cleanse first that which is within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also (Matthew 23:26). As we now follow instructions to begin with the inside, we must keep in mind that we are not in the least cleansing our heart for our own sake. It is not for our own enjoyment that we furbish and tidy the guest chamber, but in order that the guest may enjoy it. Will he find it pleasant? we ask ourselves. Will he stay? Our every thought is for him. Then we withdraw and keep in the background and expect no recompense. There are three kinds of nature in man, as Nicetas Stethatos further explains: the carnal man, who wants to live for his own pleasure, even if it harms others; the natural man, who wants to please both himself and others; and the spiritual man, who wants to please only God, even if it harms himself. The first is lower than human nature, the second is normal, the third is above nature; it is life in Christ. Spiritual man thinks spiritually; his hope is sometime to hear the angels' joy over one sinner that repents (Luke 15:10), and that sinner is himself. Such should be your feeling, and in this hope, you should labor, for the Lord has bidden us be perfect even as your Father which is in Heaven is perfect (Matthew 5:48), and to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness (6:33). Therefore, give yourself no rest, allow yourself no peace until you have slain that part within you that belongs to your carnal nature. Make it your purpose to track down every sign of the bestial within you and persecute it relentlessly. For the flesh lust against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh (Galatians 5: 17). But if you are fearful of becoming self-righteous from working for your own salvation, or afraid of being overcome by spiritual pride, examine yourself and observe that the person who is afraid of becoming

self-righteous suffers from blindness. For he does not see how self-righteous he is.”<sup>4</sup>

Ego, self-love, not denying ourselves are the main obstacles that hinder our growth in the spiritual life or as one once said the passion of self-love is a huge emotional force that destroys humanity “Again, my beloved brother, I want to talk to you about your ‘self’; that which you sometimes love and trust more than God... Unless you deny yourself, you will never enjoy the beauty of the release of the spirit. As love is the first commandment in Christianity, self-denial is the main path leading to love.. You cannot love God and people as long as you are concerned only about yourself and your pleasures.. So, be released first from this self, for the Lord glory be to Him-says, "Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me." (Mark. 8:34). Thus, the Lord made self-denial the first requirement. My beloved brother let your aim be to conceal yourself in God so as not to have an independent existence separate from Him. Say along with St. Paul the Apostle, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. " (Gal. 2:20). If you ever wish to have glory, let your glory be from God and in God's sight and repeat always the verse which says, "O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself." (John. 1 7:5). Do not seek glory in the worldly things because "the world is passing away, and the lust of it" (1 John. 2:17). But you, who are the son of God. ".. you are the temple of God and the Spirit of God dwells in you" (1 Cor. 3:16). You are born, "not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." (John. 1:13). That soul of yours is from God, a breath of His mouth. In every Mass, you partake of the Holy Flesh and Blood of God to be one with Him and abide in Him as He wants. Why then do you neglect such a great glory to seek another in the dust? Why are you concerned about what others say of you and why do you become pleased when they praise you and defend yourself when they attack you? Why do you beg their approval by talking about yourself My brother, I am afraid you still love the dust and the glory of it! Is your self still an idol which you give sacrifices and offerings to? Deny yourself, my dear, and give all your love to God alone. Say along with John the Baptist, "He must increase, but I must decrease. " (John 3:30). I hear you grumbling, 'I do not want to decrease'. Know then that you will not lose except the dregs that spoil your purity, and the worldly glory which is the dust that sticks to you. You have to remove yourself of such glory to return clean as God has created you and as He wants you to be always. That concerns your relations with the others, but I want to talk to you concerning your look towards yourself and how you ought to stand in the presence of

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<sup>4</sup> Tito Colliander, Way of the Ascetics, Chapter 5, PP. 12-16

God. If you want the release of your spirit, stand before God as nothing. Deny any knowledge or wisdom you have. deny your intelligence and experience. Stand in God's presence as an ignorant person who knows nothing. But I do not mean that you feign ignorance or pretend this because God cannot be deceived and does not like those who pretend. What I mean is to be convinced-in every matter-that your self must be concealed so that the Lord Jesus Christ may appear, not only before people, but also before yourself. Say to Him, 'O Lord, I judge according to the appearances. I am weak and cannot resist the devils. The results of any work are in Your hand.'" Ask God to intervene and guide you, or to dwell in you and work through you. Then, when the required thing is performed, thank God because it is He who did it not you. And when people come to praise you do not boast or pretend to be humble but seize the opportunity and chant to them the psalm which says, "If it had not been the Lord who was on our side, let Israel now say-If it had not been the Lord who was on our side, when men rose up against us, then they would have swallowed us alive... Then the waters would have overwhelmed us, the stream would have gone over our soul" (Ps. 124: 1-4). When you are fought with a certain sin, do not trust your power nor depend on your past triumph because sin, "has cast down many wounded, and all who were slain by her were strong men." (Prov. 7:26). But, be sure that victory is the Lord's and if He does forsake you in the slightest sins, you will be like the people of Sodom... Chant then that beautiful psalm which says, "You knew my path. In the way in which I walk they have secretly set a snare for me. Look on my right hand and see, for there is no one who acknowledges me. Refuge has failed me; no one cares for my soul. I cried out to You, O Lord: I said, 'You are my refuge, My portion in the land of the living... Deliver me from my persecutors, for they are stronger than I.. (Ps. 142: 3-6). My beloved brother, you are nothing, and you have to admit this before God and before yourself. Whenever you think that you are able to do something, come to your self and say: "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the children of Israel out of Egypt? " (Ex. 3:11). However, if God convinces you that He will be your mouth and will speak through your tongue and that you will be just an instrument, then proceed on your way. Though you walk through the valley of the shadow of death, you will fear no evil; and though an army encamps against you, you will be confident in this. At such time remember me, the unclean dust, so that we may meet together there..”<sup>5</sup>

To deny and be able to conquer ourselves. First, we need to realize our nothingness and constantly keep in our minds the fact that by ourselves we

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<sup>5</sup> Pope Shenouda, The release of the spirit, Chapter 11 (Yourself in the presence of God), PP. 76-79

can do nothing good, to ask for God's help in a warm and humble prayers, that if we fall into some transgression, quickly to turn to the realization of our weakness and be aware of it. For God allows us to fall for the very purpose of making us more aware of our weakness, so that we may thus not only ourselves learn to despise ourselves, but because of our great weakness we may also wish to be despised by others.<sup>6</sup> After entreating God in prayers, the most practical way of denying ourselves is Obedience as St. John Climacus said slay your pride or self-will by the knife of obedience. Obedience is a total renunciation of ourselves. Obedience is the burial place of the will and the resurrection of lowliness. Obedience is not about my will; it's about submitting my will to the other.

“Look, O my eyes, upon Him crucified and listen, O my ears, to the hammer, pounding the nails into my Beloveds' body. Taste, O my tongue, the bitterness that He, of whom it was said, “His mouth is most sweet, Yes, He is altogether lovely,” (Song of Sol 5:16), tasted before you. Contemplate, O my soul, the extent to which your God has gone for you. He enthroned Himself upon the cross, assumed a crown of thorns, robed Himself with nakedness and accepted nails for His royal scepter and sour wine and gall for His drink. Should you not then mourn and weep for your negligence in your service to Him? Here He is humiliated and insulted for your sake! Does this not shatter your conceit and weaken your pride?”<sup>7</sup> Let us then weaken and shatter our conceit and pride for the sake of Who has emptied Himself and denied Himself on the cross by slaying our wills or as the fathers called it self-persecution.

Slaying of our will and our ego, it is the most beautiful sacrifice we can offer. When a man raises his hand with the cross as with a spiritual knife so that he may slay and deny himself, his will, his desires... that he holds on to, just as Abraham raised up the knife to slay Isaac. And just as Isaac came back alive, but he was called the son of blessing and promise, likewise we slay and deny ourselves with the cross. We then acquire the will and thoughts of Christ. With this we sing with the apostle I've been crucified with Christ, it's no longer I who live since I've crucified the 'I' but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.

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<sup>6</sup> Theophan the Recluse, Unseen Warfare, Chapter 2, P. 83

<sup>7</sup> Fr. Manasseh Youhanna. The Crucified Jesus. St Shenouda Monastery. Chapter 6, P. 81