



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

April 2021

### Forgive One Another

*“Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times”<sup>1</sup>*

“Abba Poemen said about Abba Isidore that Whenever he addressed the brethren in church, he said only one thing: ‘Forgive your brother, so that you, too, may be forgiven.’”<sup>2</sup> He who would be reconciled to God and have peace with God must first be reconciled with his neighbor. *“If someone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also.”* (1 John 4:20-21) Forgiveness, according to the Fathers, is the gateway into the life of repentance, and therefore to the kingdom of God. Forgiveness is the beginning and the necessary beginning for all true spiritual endeavors which will bring us closer to a loving God who himself is marked out by his forgiveness of our many transgressions. Without forgiveness, without true, encompassing forgiveness, our approach into the kingdom of the forgiving God will always be hindered, may even be prevented.

We speak of forgiveness so much in the Church, so much in the Christian life, that, too often, we simply forget to listen. We forget the meaning of this term, of this idea, and this action, and we forget, too, the real centrality that it is to have in our life in Christ. It is a centrality that is nonetheless brought home time and time again, not only in the writings of the Fathers, but in the liturgical services of the Church, in the prayers, in the hymns, and in every corner and aspect of Orthodox life. And yet, we lose track of forgiveness perhaps because we hear about it so often. Yet it remains key and central to all that we are and all that we do, and when we pay attention to what the Church says in her prayers and her hymns about the need to forgive, about the act of forgiving, tied to the reality of receiving in our heart God’s forgiveness, when we truly listen, we realize just how critical, just how central true forgiveness actually is.

This centrality is brought to mind by another saying of the Egyptian desert. Drawn from the Sayings of Abba Sisoës from the sayings of the fathers, we have this.

A brother who was insulted by another brother came to the abba and said to him, “I was hurt, Abba, by my brother, and I wish to avenge myself.” The abba tried to console him, and he said, “Do not do this, my child. Rather, leave vengeance to God.” But he said, “I

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 18:21

<sup>2</sup> Abba Isidore, Sayings of the Desert Fathers

will not quit until I avenge myself.” Then the abba said, “Let us pray, brother.” And, standing up, he proclaimed aloud, “Our Father, Do Not forgive us our trespasses just as we do not forgive those who trespass against us.” And hearing these words, the brother fell at the feet of the teacher and said, “I am not going to fight with my brother any more. Forgive me, my dear father!”

When we pray the Our Father, the prayer of the Lord, we do something mysterious and frightful. We call God to respond to our heart as we offer our heart to Him through our brothers and sisters. “Come, O Lord, and forgive me my sins even as I forgive those who sin against me.” We call ourselves into a relationship of mutual forgiveness in this prayer which forms an integral part of every service of the Orthodox Church, every act of prayer.

This is the prayer that the Lord himself taught his disciples, and it is one that shows us, that reminds us again and again not simply that we ought to forgive, but that the forgiveness we show our brethren is tied to our ability to receive forgiveness from God. Conversely, inasmuch as we do not forgive, as we refuse—because we desire vengeance because vengeance is a wolf in sheep’s clothing it’s seeking what is right and truth but it is driven by hate or revenge, because we harbor anger or even animosity or even discomfort that makes it frightening, intimidating, to seek forgiveness, and to offer it—for any of these causes, whenever we do not forgive, we break the relationship of forgiveness that God establishes with us.

It is not an easy thing, to forgive. It is a challenge. It is a real act of asceticism. There are times when it is a simple, straightforward act. To those with whom we have a close relationship, it is at times easy to forgive small things, perhaps large things. But forgiveness is an act of obedience and love and genuine self-denial, and the test of real love comes in the challenge of real forgiveness when it is not an easy thing. When it is challenging, there is a kind of fear that comes from a belief that we might suffer through the act of offering forgiveness.

Someone might respond poorly, but there is a more insidious fear that comes from our own heart, within our own troubled souls: a fear of embarrassment, a fear of our state of well-being. Am I ready to forgive? Have I come to a place where I feel I can forgive? These are deadly, dangerous questions for the Christian life. Christ calls us always to forgive: not tomorrow, not in the future, not when we feel ready or so inclined, but now, at this moment. Father, forgive me as I forgive. To be able to forgive, we have to look at the cross daily and realize first that I need forgiveness myself, that my sins nailed Christ on the cross. “It was only natural that the first word to be uttered by the Lord upon the cross would be a prayer of forgiveness for those who had treated him with brutal cruelty, for He who had said, *“But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you,”* (Matt 5:44). He would surely walk in accordance with His own teachings and commandments.”<sup>3</sup>

To be victorious is to forgive “So many great people were afflicted in the same way, but they were not noble in their affliction. They had uttered bitter words and had died cursing their deliverers and murderers, but Christ was victorious when He said to the

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<sup>3</sup> Fr. Manasseh Youhanna. *The Crucified Jesus*. St Shenouda Monastery. Chapter 10, P. 126

Father, "Forgive them." One of the saintly fathers once said, "For whom did Jesus pray? It was for the Jews who were killing Him who had bestowed upon them His many blessings. He prayed for them in the midst of His violent tortures and severe suffering. Had He prayed for them after His resurrection after His agony had vanished and His sorrows had dissipated and had tasted the sweetness of the fruits of His death, the matter would not have been so astonishing but rather He was asking for the forgiveness of His enemies whilst they were cursing and abusing Him. He asked forgiveness for His enemies before He had uttered any other expression even about Himself, His mother or John His disciple."<sup>4</sup>

Love and find an excuse "A pious man once contemplated, "Would that my eye, O my Savior, was a lamp, my blood oil, my flesh candles, and all that is within and without me melt and burn with Your love." "For they do not know what they do." This is a petition for mercy, simple in form, deep in meaning, beautiful in significance. It is the best petition raised to the Father of mercies in heaven. The Savior understates the offenses of His killers so that the Father may forgive them. The inference of Christ's words then is that those who crucified Him did not realize the greatness of the sin they had committed. This corresponds with the words of the Apostle Peter, "*I know that you did it in ignorance, as did also your rulers,*" (Act 3:17) and those of St Paul, "*for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory,*" (1 Cor 2:8)."<sup>5</sup>

We, however, should also learn from this entreaty the necessity of forgiving our enemies who oppress us. For, if God, in all His majestic might, forgave those who injured Him, should we, in our wretchedness and lowly state, not forgive our own adversaries?<sup>6</sup>

The person who is led by his rational human nature, however, will forgive the offender and moreover will love him and will be compassionate toward him as a physician would love the patient but hate the sickness and do all in his power to eradicate it. Struggle, then, to cure the sickness of your enemy with your love and compassion, "*Therefore If your enemy is hungry, feed him; If he is thirsty, give him a drink; For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good,*" (Rom 12:20-21). St Peter the Apostle places before us our Savior as an example of this when he says, "*Who committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth; who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously,*" (1 Pt 2:22-23). Many people fear bearing with the abuse of the wicked lest it be encouraged to continue but as the wise man says, "*A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger,*" (Prov 15:1). The punishment of sin does not affect the perpetrator to the extent as its forgiveness. If we say that Christ, as the incarnate God, was capable of forgiving His crucifiers but we as humans do not have the same capacity, we should then ponder Joseph as forgives his brothers and David as he rejects harming Saul who seeks to kill him and Stephen as he cries out with a loud voice, "*Lord, do not charge them with this sin,*" (Acts 7:59,60) as he is being stoned to death and

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<sup>4</sup> Fr. Manasseh Youhanna. The Crucified Jesus. St Shenouda Monastery. Chapter 10, P. 128,129

<sup>5</sup> Fr. Manasseh Youhanna. The Crucified Jesus. St Shenouda Monastery. Chapter 10, P. 130

<sup>6</sup> Fr. Manasseh Youhanna. The Crucified Jesus. St Shenouda Monastery. Chapter 10, P. 132

St Paul as he says, “*Being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we endure,*” (1 Cor 4:12). We might also consider St Cyprian who, when condemned to die by the sword, ordered twenty-five pieces of gold to be given the executioner who administered the sentence with trembling hand. Nothing affects the soul as much as the forgiveness of wrongdoing. There is no doubt that the Lord’s forgiveness had a more profound effect on the souls than revenge ever could have had, and this incident is still a fragrant scent that spreads to attract many. It is said that a missionary once related to a native chief the story of Christ’s forgiveness upon the cross. Once he had finished, the chief commanded him to leave the country explaining that were the missionary to be allowed to speak these words to the people he feared they would be attracted to Christianity for no such teaching existed in the religion of the land. St Paul advised, “do not let the sun go down on your wrath,” (Eph 4:26-27). So many people go to sleep with hostility entrenched in their hearts. What would they do if death comes suddenly upon them while they still bore enmity toward others? Are they then able to approach the gate of heaven offering God their enmity?<sup>7</sup> St. Augustine of Hippo, which nonetheless is deeply revealing to the true nature of things, Imagine, (he says) the vanity of thinking that your enemy can do you more damage than your enmity. Imagine the oddity of our belief—and we all harbor this from time to time in our lives—that someone else can harm us more than the damage caused to the soul, to the whole heart and mind of a person, when we harbor hatred in a body fit and created for love. Forgiveness stands as the doorway to salvation. It stands here as our gateway into the Great Fast.

When someone, by the power of the Spirit of God, overrides the resistance of the flesh and the pull of unforgiveness, it’s shocking. It’s one of the rarest moments in the lives of everyone looking on. It’s when you get to see with your physical eyes evidence of the Spirit of God as real as if you can touch it. It is a moment no one forgets. When this world—so saturated with flesh resenting flesh, hearts hating hearts, fists slamming fists, Pride rising against pride—suddenly sees someone dropping their sword and daring to whisper, “I forgive” ...IT STOPS ALL. In the split second of that utterance, evil is arrested, heaven touches earth, and the richest evidence of the truth of the gospel reverberates not just that day but for generations to come. While salvation is what brings the flesh of a human into perfect alignment with the Spirit of God, forgiveness is the greatest evidence that the truth of God lives in us. And none who sees this can walk away unaffected.

“Remember: resentful proof locked inside of you never exercised justice. It never made someone else change or righted a wrong. It never made someone repent for all they would done. It only hurt you and imprisoned you behind the label of victim. It is like sitting in the debris of a demolished building, refusing to let any of it be carried away. “No!” you cry. “I must hold on to this shattered glass and these broken bricks, the framing all twisted and toppled like sticks.” It must be seen for what it is: evidence” “of an ending. But once acknowledged and cleared of harmful debris, this same place is good ground for a beautiful rebuilding. That collected proof is not a treasure, nor is it a souvenir proving the hard place you have traveled to or your secret weapon of justice. It is debris. Though you believe it’s protecting you and making your world better, it’s ugly and sharp. And nothing about it is healing your heart. It is time to call it what it is and start clearing it away. You can take what is not broken from among its piles. Not everything is awful inside your memory files. You must empty enough so you can shift from griever to receiver. There is new to be found.

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<sup>7</sup> Fr. Manasseh Youhanna. *The Crucified Jesus*. St Shenouda Monastery. Chapter 10, P. 133,134

The new healing you discover will be wonderful, but it probably will not give you answers for why all this hurt happened. Making peace with the past does not mean that you will ever be able to make sense of what happened. Good thing there is something better than answers. To get better you do not have to know why. Why they hurt you, why they misunderstood you, why they betrayed you, why they did not love you, protect you, or stay like they should. “Their reasons are multilayered with a mysterious mix of their own pain. They are dealing with their own heartbreak and their own soul wrestling. And in the end, I do not think they even know all the reasons they made the choices they did. Knowing why is no gift at all if it never makes sense. Maybe they loved themselves too much or much too little. Maybe their hearts were too disconnected or hard or brittle. Soft hearts do not break or beat or belittle, but broken hearts with unhealed pasts can often be found traveling wrong paths. They hurt, they sting,” “they say words they do not really mean. The pain they project is just an effort to protect all that feels incredibly fragile inside of them. And I do not know why they did what they did. But answers about “why” are not what you need. Waiting for something from them holds you hostage to what the other person might not ever be willing to give. But if you want to move on? Heal? Lay down what hurts? It’s 100 percent your choice to make.”

Holding on to hate, grudges, unforgiving, enmity is the greatest burden, it is like trying to move forward while still being tied to the past. Let us pray for one another, loving and forgiving one another just as Christ forgave us. Let us run to Him and cast this heavy burden that is burdening our hearts and making us lose our joy and peace for He said *“Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.”* (Matthew 11:28-30)