



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

**July 2021**

### **Holy Silence**

"Above all things, love silence." Teaches us St. Isaac the Syrian, saying, "Love silence, my brother, for in it you have life for your soul. In silence you see yourself. Outside of silence you do not see except what is outside yourself. So long as you will see others you will never see yourself. A silent mouth interprets God's mysteries. It was told that Archbishop Theophilus went to the desert to visit Abba Pambo. But Abba Pambo did not speak to him. When the brethren finally said to Abba Pambo, "Father, say something to the archbishop so that he may be edified," he replied, "If he is not edified by my silence, he will not be edified by my speech." There is really little more that can or should be said. If people are not edified by our silence, then they will not be edified by our words. How the desert fathers emphasized the importance of silence, stillness and avoiding idle talking especially for us as monastics. "Silent your mouth so that your heart can speak and silent your heart so God can speak" The fathers teach us that we grow in the spiritual life in silence just like as an embryo grows in its mother's womb in silence so the same for us in the womb of the monastic life we grow in our spiritual life in silence, stillness and avoiding idle talking.

The fathers teach us to Compel ourselves in silence, the mother of all godly virtues. Keep silent in order to say the prayer. For when one speaks, how is it possible to avoid idle talk, which gives rise to every evil word, which weighs the soul down with blame? At your work, flee conversation; only speak in moderation when necessary. Let the hands work for the needs of the body, and let the mind say the sweetest name of Christ, so that the need of the soul, which we must not forget even for a moment, will also be provided for. Struggle in silence, prayer, and mourning, and you will find the elements of eternal life. Compel yourself: close your mouth both in joy and in mourning. This is a mark of experience, so that both states are kept safely. For the mouth does not know how to guard riches. Silence is the greatest and most fruitful virtue; for this reason, the God-bearing Fathers called it sinlessness. As Abba Arsenius once said, "I have often repented of having spoken, but never of having remained silent" and when he prayed "Lord, lead me into the way of salvation," he heard a voice saying, "Arsenius, flee, be silent, pray always, for those are the sources of sinlessness". Silence and stillness, one and the same thing. The first divine fruit of silence is mourning—godly sorrow, joyful sadness. Afterwards come luminous thoughts, which bring the holy flow of life-streaming tears, through which the second baptism occurs and by which the soul is purified, shines, and becomes like the angels.

How the eyes of the mind are opened and see Jesus with sweetness greater than that of honey! What a novel wonder is worked from lawful silence and an attentive intellect! Do not speak unnecessary words, for they chill your soul's divine zeal. Love silence, which gives birth to all virtues and fences in the soul so that the devil's evil does not approach it. "Better to fall from a height than with the tongue." The tongue does the greatest harm to man. Salvation is not gained when we speak idly or when we pass our days without keeping accounts. Be careful with your tongue and your thoughts, for guarding them fills the soul with the light of God. But he whose mouth is unbridled deposits various impurities in his soul. Flee from idle words and laughter if you want your prayer to have boldness through tears and grace! Constantly say the prayer intensely, with zeal, with longing; only thus does one become strong in soul. Avoid idle words at all costs, for they weaken the soul and then it does not have the strength to struggle. This is no time for daydreaming, but a season for spiritual profit. Who can guarantee that after going to sleep, we shall wake up? Therefore, let us compel ourselves. When one keeps silent, he is given time and freedom for prayer and concentration; but when he passes his hours carelessly, he does not have time to pray. Furthermore, through his careless speech he accumulates various sins. For this reason, the holy Fathers placed the virtue of silence at the summit of the virtues, for without it no virtue is able to remain in the soul of man. Always be prudent in your words; that is, first think and then speak; do not let your tongue run ahead before you think what you have to say. Do not become bold in talking much, many are the evils from this evil boldness. Flee from it as from fire or a viper! Guard yourself from boldness in talking and untimely words; they dry up the soul of man. Silence, meekness, and the prayer, on the other hand, fill the soul with heavenly dew, with a mourning full of sweetness. Despise idle talk as the mother of coldness and dryness, for idle talk drives the tears away from our eyes; that is, it takes them away from us and our soul withers. Let us have patience, humility, and love, and guard our tongue, for when it defeats a person, it becomes an irrepressible evil for him, sweeping away also other people in its course and casting them down into the abysses of sin.

St. John Climacus once saw some monks speaking evil of another when he rebuked them, they answered we are worried about him and we are trying to see how to help him, he rebuked them further saying if you want to help him pray for him don't slander him. Do we not know that when we speak ill and slander one another we are instigating the devil to do more harm to that person so we can still speak greater evil of him and slander him and in this way we both lose our salvation but on the other hand when we pray for that person and treat him with kindness God helps him and we restrain the evil one from harming him further? Sirach teaches saying "If you blow on a spark, it will increase to a fire. But if you spit on it, it will be extinguished. Both of these proceed from the mouth" (Sirach 28:14) Slander is a great evil. Just as the little rudder steers the whole ship wherever it wants, likewise the tongue leads a person either to good or to evil. The holy fathers greatly censure judging other people's sins, faults, or evil habits. When we judge our brother, we condemn ourselves to a great sin. But when we cover our brother, God will also protect us from great sins. When we expose our brother, we drive the grace of God away from us and He permits us to fall into the same sins so that we learn that we are all weak, and that the grace of God supports us. Whoever guards his tongue guards his soul from great sins and grievous falls. The chief cause of criticism and slander is pride and egotism, because one considers oneself better than the others. For this reason, it is very beneficial for a person to think of himself as below everyone, so that he considers his brother better than him in order that, with the help of God, he may be delivered from this evil. If something pushes you to

criticism in any matter regarding a brother or the monastery, try to pray about the matter instead, without passing it under the judgment of your reason. If you turn within yourself through prayer, humility, and mourning, you will find a spiritual treasure—just keep pride and criticism far from you.

we guard our mouths so that our hearts may be kept pure. And when it stays pure, God comes and dwells in it, and then it becomes a temple of God. The holy angels rejoice to be in such a heart! Likewise, drive away filthy thoughts with anger and the prayer; the prayer is a fire that burns and expels the demons. Be careful with your mouth, but primarily with your mind; do not let evil thoughts start talking with you. Do not let your mouth say words that could perhaps wound your brother. Let your mouth put forth words which are fragrant: words of consolation, courage, and hope. It is a person's mouth that reveals his interior, his inner man "A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart brings forth evil. For out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks." (Luke 6:45). Struggle, as much as you can to become forceful—force yourself in everything, especially in silence and in mournful tears. When silence is practiced with knowledge and maintained with tears, the foundation stone of monasticism is set, on which the secure house will be built wherein the soul will find spiritual warmth and comfort. It is a bad sign for the soul's future if silence is not kept, since one who is not silent scatters whatever he gathers; for a monk who is free with his mouth will be disorderly in everything. When we are silent, we have the time for interior prayer, which brings full assurance, and the time for luminous thoughts, which fill the intellect and heart with light. Therefore, compel yourself in everything, for the good beginning is praised, but the negligent beginning is censured, for its end is most lamentable. We have so much material offered by the devil, the world, and our carelessness to talk about idly, so many events and stories that are taking place and will take place, that we have plenty to occupy ourselves with; while "the one thing needful," to approach God through prayer, we have laid aside. Our need for this spiritual turning to God is so urgent that nothing else should preoccupy us other than how to be close to God by means of prayer and holy thoughts, which also greatly help us achieve this goal. Out of the such silences have come the great prophets - Moses from the desert, Amos from the hillside, Paul from Arabia, John the Baptist from the wilderness, St. Anthony from the desert, and our Lord Jesus from the seclusion of Nazareth and from His forty days and nights in the wilderness. Elijah found that the Lord was not in the whirlwind, nor in the earthquake, nor in the fire, but in the still small voice. It was in silence that God spoke to him. Isaiah learned that "in quietness and confidence" lay the sources of his strength. The saints and monastics of every age unite in testifying that silence is an indispensable condition of spiritual knowledge, that without it we cannot call our souls our own, that "a man does not see himself in running water but in still water," that spiritual realities do not shriek or shout but that God is waiting in the depths of our being to talk to us if we will only "wash our souls with silence." "Silence," writes St. John of the Ladder, "is the mother of prayer. a continuous ascension to heaven."

Oh, if only you would gather together, like the ancient fathers, for spiritual edification and mutual instruction, we would not converse about irrelevant things and affairs which don't concern us, but only about this, how each of us will work out our own salvation (Philip. 2:12): what sort of cell rule to have and how to perform it, what struggles to undertake. Thus, we would edify and support one another on our path, stretching out a helping hand to each other, and the words of the all-wise Solomon would be realized in us: A brother helped by a brother is as a strong city (Prov. 18:19). And our assembly would be

like the assembly of the angels, who in spite of their great multitude have one common holy will, one striving—how to fulfill the will of the Creator.

O dear beloved fathers, not for nothing is our monastic order called the angelic order!... Surely each of us who has gathered in the holy monastery in the name of the Lord has one and the same will, one striving common to us all: how he may please the Lord (I Cor. 7:32). We have no earthly fetters binding us to the world, there are no anxieties and worldly cares to entangle our wings and hinder our flight to our Heavenly Bridegroom! We are free, like the birds of the air, which sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; but our heavenly Father feeds us (Matt. 6:26). Let us then remember our angelic calling and walk worthy of the vocation wherewith we are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph. 4:1-3), as the holy Apostle teaches.