



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

October 2021

### The Life of Sojourn

**“I am a stranger with You, A sojourner, as all my fathers were.”**

A brother once asked abba Poemen, “how should I conduct myself in the place where I live? The elder replied; wherever you live put it in your heart that you are a stranger and a sojourner and do not seek that your word should be heard, and, in this way, you will live in peace.” Abraham was told to leave his country, family, and his father’s house for the sake of God. He was told to leave his previous life in order to start a new life with God. It is the same for the monk; he moves to a new family and becomes a son of the monastery. Why did God tell Abraham to leave his country, family, and his father’s house? Abraham was told this so that he could worship the Lord in the wilderness. We remember Abraham always had the tent and the altar. The tent is a symbol of a life of sojourn and the altar the life of worship.<sup>1</sup>

We read in Hebrews These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things, declare plainly that they seek a country. And truly if they had been mindful of that country from whence, they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. But now they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly; wherefore God is not ashamed to be called Their God, for He has prepared for them a city. The first virtue for a monk, the whole of virtue is to be a stranger to this world, and a sojourner, and to have nothing in common with things here, but to hang loose from them, as from things strange to us; As those blessed disciples did, of whom he says, “They wandered about in sheepskins, in goat-skins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented: of whom the world was not worthy.” They indeed then speak of themselves as strangers; but Paul said somewhat much beyond this: for not merely did he call himself a stranger, but said that he was dead to the world, and that the world was dead to him. For the world (he says) has been crucified to me and I to the world. The saints were strangers and sojourners. How and in what way? And where does Abraham confess himself to be a stranger and a sojourner? Perhaps indeed he even himself confessed it: but David both confessed, I am a stranger, and what? as all my fathers were. For they who dwell in tents, they who purchase even burial places for money, evidently were in some sense strangers, as they had not even where to bury their dead.

What then? Did they mean that they were strangers in respect of that land that is in Palestine? By no means: but in respect of the whole world: and this with reason; for they saw therein none of the things which they were wishing for, but everything foreign and strange to

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Shenouda, On the Monastic Life (SSM Press), P. 34

them. They indeed wished to practice themselves in virtue: but here there was much wickedness, and things were quite foreign to them. They had no friend, no familiar acquaintance, save only some few.

But how were they strangers? They had no care for things here. And this they showed not by words, but by very deeds. How and in what manner?

He said to Abraham, “Leave your country, that which seems [thy country] and come to one that belongs to others:” And he did not cleave to his own [friends and home] but gave it up as unconcernedly as if he were about to leave a foreign land. He said to him, “Offer up your son,” and he offered him up as if he had no son; as if he had divested himself of his nature, so he offered him up. The wealth which he had acquired was common to all passersby, and this he accounted as nothing. He was wont to yield up the first places to others: to throw himself into dangers; to suffer troubles innumerable. He built no splendid houses, he enjoyed no luxuries, which all belong to the things of this world; but lived in all respects as one whose home is in the City which has foundations; he exhibited hospitality; brotherly love; mercifulness; forbearance; contempt for wealth and for present glory, and for all else.<sup>2</sup>

“There is such a thing as exile (Sojourn), an irrevocable renunciation of everything in one’s familiar surroundings that hinders one from attaining the ideal of holiness. Exile (Sojourn) is a disciplined heart, unheralded wisdom, and unpublicized understanding, a hidden life, masked ideals. It is unseen meditation, the striving to be humble, a wish for poverty, the longing for what is divine. It is an outpouring of love, a denial of vainglory, a depth of silence.

The Lord says every prophet is without honor in his own country (John 4:44). We had better be careful that our act of renunciation is not for empty honor. Exile is a separation from everything, in order that one may hold and totally to God. It is a chosen route of great grief. An exile is a fugitive, running from all relationships with his own relatives and with strangers. Do not wait for souls captivated of the world when you are pressing on towards solitude in exile. In any case, death comes when least expected. Many set themselves the aim of rescuing the indifferent and the lazy and end up lost themselves. The flame within them gets dim with the passage of time. So, if you have the fire, run, since you never know when may be doused, leaving you stranded in darkness. Not all of us are summoned to rescue others. “My Brothers, each one of us Will give an account of himself to God,” says the holy Apostle. Again, he declares, “you teach someone else, but not yourself.” It is as if he were saying, “I do not know about others, but we have surely to look to what we must do ourselves.”

Detachment is good and its mother is exile. Someone withdrawing from the world for the sake of the Lord is no longer attached to possessions, that he should not appear to be deceived by the passions. If you have left the world, then do not begin to reach out for it. Otherwise, your passions Will come back to you. Eve had no wish to be driven from paradise, whereas a monk Will abandon his homeland willingly; she would have wished again for the forbidden tree, but he has rebuffed the sure danger coming from the kinship of the flesh. Run from the places of sin as though from the plague. When fruit is not in plain sight, we have no great urge to taste it. We have to beware the ways in the guile of thieves. They come with the suggestion to us that we should not really abandon the world. Then again, we manage for some time to live away from our relatives. We practice a little piety, compunction, self-control. And then the empty thoughts come tramping toward us, seeking to run us back to the places we knew. They tell us what a listen we are, what an example, what the help to those who witnessed our former wicked deeds. If we happen to be articulate and well informed, they assure us that

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<sup>2</sup> St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Epistle of St. Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews.

we could be rescuers of souls and teachers of the world. They tell us all this so that we might scatter at sea the treasures we have assembled while in port. So, we had better imitate Lot, and certainly not his wife. The soul turning back to the regions from which it came will be like the salt that has lost savor, indeed like that famous pillar. Run from Egypt, run and do not turn back. The heart yearning for the land there will never see Jerusalem, the land of dispassion.

Leaving home, some at the beginning are full of innocence. Their souls are clean. And then do you want very much to go back, thinking, perhaps, that they might bring salvation to others, having attained it themselves. A true exile, despite his possession of knowledge, sits like someone a foreign speech among men of other tongues. If we have taken up the solitary life, we certainly ought not to abhor our own relations or our own places, but we ought to be careful to avoid any harm that may come from these. Here, as in everything, Christ is our teacher. Some people said to Him, “your mother and your brothers are looking for you,” and at once Christ gave an example of detachment that was nonetheless free from any harsh feelings. “My mother and my brothers are those who do the will of my Father in heaven,” He said. So let your father be the one who is able and willing to labor with you in bearing the burden of your sins, and your mother the compunction that is strong enough to wash away your filth. Let your brother be the companion and rival in the race that leads to heaven and may the constant thought of death be your spouse. Let your longed-for offspring be the moaning of your heart. May your body be your slave, and your friends the holy powers who can help you at the hour of dying if they become your friends. “This is the generation of those who seek the Lord.” If you long for God, you drive out your love for family. Anyone telling you he can combine these yearnings is deceiving himself. “no one can serve two masters”. Do not let the tears of parents or friends fill you with pity.

There is no greater example of renunciation than that Great man (Abraham) who heard the command, “Leave your country and your family and the house of your father”. Obediently he went to a foreign country where the language was different. And so it is that anyone following this model of renunciation is glorified all more by the Lord. An attachment to any of our relations or even to a stranger is hard enough to deal with. It can gradually put us back toward the world and make cool the fire of our contrition. A bird sometimes needs to fly against the wind to reach its nest so also, he cannot look to heaven and to earth at the same time; similarly, if you have not turned your back completely on your relatives and others in thought and in body, you cannot avoid endangering your soul.<sup>3</sup> For here we have no continuing city, but we seek the one to come. (Hebrews 13:14) this earth that we live in is not our homeland we are nothing but strangers and sojourners. Our life is nothing but a journey to eternity. In spite of how long our sojourning in this wilderness we are going back to our eternal home. We are nothing but the dove which Noah released. It could not find rest till it went back to the ark.<sup>4</sup>

We became sojourners by our own choice let us not get tangled back with the worldly affairs. **I want nothing of the world, for the world is too poor to give me..** If what I want is available in the world, the world would be a heaven.. But it is still an, earth as I see.. there is nothing in it except material things.. in fact I search for heavenly matters, for the Spirit, for God.

**I want nothing of the world, for I am not of the world..** I am not dust as they think, I am a divine breath.. I was with God from eternity, and God placed me on the earth.. But I shall leave it after a while and return to God.. *‘I came forth from the Father, and have come into the world. Again, I leave the world and go to the Father’* (John.

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<sup>3</sup> John Climacus, *The Ladder Of Divine Ascent* (Paulist Press), Step 3 On Exile, PP. 85-88

<sup>4</sup> St. Habib Girgis, *Mystery of Godliness*

16:28). This world takes more than what it gives.. It subjects those who desire it... So I want nothing of it.

**I want nothing of the world, all that I want is to get rid of it,** to be released from it, from the flesh and from the earth! I want to return to God-as before-to be again a holy breath not defiled by any worldly thing.

**I want nothing of the world because I seek eternal immortal things** and the world has nothing that is immortal. All that is in the world is passing away, even the world itself will perish and come to nothing. I do not seek perishable things.

**I want nothing of the world, for I am superior to it..** I am a son of God - in the image of God and after His likeness.. I am a temple for the Holy Spirit and a place of dwelling for God.. I am the only creature who partakes of His holy flesh and blood.. I am superior to the world and the world is asking me to give it.. for I have the keys of the heavens and earth.. I, whom God, in His loving-kindness and humbleness, willed to make me the light of the world and the salt of the earth (Matt. 5:13,14).

**I want nothing of the world, because I want to live as my fathers did;** those whom the earth was not deserving to trod on .. They lived so, received nothing of the world. On the other hand they were a blessing to the world.. For the sake of their prayers God sent water on the earth.. and for their sakes God preserved the world till today.

**I want nothing of the world, because I want You alone;** You who loved me till the end and gave Yourself up for me; You who formed me out of nothing and was not in need of my service but it is rather I who was in need of your sovereignty.. Therefore, I want to be released from the world and be united to You, who gave me the gift of knowing You.<sup>5</sup>

Let us not want anything from this world and confess that we are strangers and pilgrims on the earth. When we say such things, we declare plainly that we seek a homeland. And truly if we had called to mind that country from which we had come out, we would have had opportunity to return. But now we desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called our God, for He has prepared a city for us. Wandering about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented—of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth because of their great love for Christ the King.

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<sup>5</sup> Pope Shenouda, The release of the spirit, Chapter 14 (I Want Nothing Of The World), PP. 88-91