



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

November 2021

On the Church

“O Lord, I have loved the beauty of Your House,
and the dwelling place of Your Glory.”¹

An elder once said “come to the Church of Christ! Here only Will you find consolation for your ravished soul. Only in the church Will you find certainty, because only in the church Will you hear the voice of Jesus saying meekly to you: Son, all your sins are forgiven. You have suffered much. Behold, I have made you whole; go and sin no more.”

If we ask ourselves where did St. Anthony hear his call? Was it not in the church? There is a strong link between the church and the monastic life that should never be broken. The monastic life is the beating heart of the church and if the heart is healthy the whole body is healthy, and if the heart is weak the whole body is weak. As God said “I have set watchmen on your walls, O Jerusalem; They shall never hold their peace day or night. You who make mention of the LORD, do not keep silent, and give Him no rest till He establishes And till He makes Jerusalem a praise in the earth. (Isaiah 62:6-7) And who are these watchmen other than the monastics? As monastics it is our duty to love the church, its services and everything in it, just as we said because we are the heart that provides blood to the whole body. St. Isaac The Syrian says “For the boast of the church of Christ is the monastic way of life”²

Without any doubt, the most exalted and precious of all earthly buildings is the church, the house of God. Though God is present everywhere, in the church, His presence manifests itself in a special way, in a most palpable and beneficial way. The church of God is an earthly heaven, as we say in the litanies of the third hour “whenever we stand in your holy sanctuary, we are considered standing in heaven.” The church is the place of God's communion with man. In it are performed all the sacraments. Day and night the church of God rings with the doxology of God. Everything is holy in the church of God, even the very walls and the air. An angel of God constantly presides over each church; the angels of God and the Saints of the church triumphant descend into it. One's presence in such a holy place comprises the greatest joy for an earthly wanderer. The holy prophet David,

¹ (Psalm 25:8)

² Saint Isaac The Syrian, The Ascetical Homilies (Holy Transfiguration Monastery), Homily 11, P. 196

though a king with large and majestic palaces and all possible means for earthly pleasure and enjoyment, examined all and counted its worth in the proper way, saying, *“One thing have I desired of the Lord, which I will require; even that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the fair beauty of the Lord and to visit His holy temple”* (Psalm 27:4). The Holy Spirit said this, uttered through the lips of David. In the church, we pray, and we are instructed, and we are purified of our sins, and we communicate with God. It is essential for a monk to attend all services, but the evil one knows the power of the church and he devices schemes to make us not attend the services in the church even by inventing sicknesses. That is a snare of the devil who hates prayer as the mother of all virtues, as the sword that destroys all evil spirits. For the devil uses all possible exertion and means, giving these means all possible good appearance, to distract monastics from prayers, to disarm him, and then to defeat him or wound him. When the bells go off in the monastery, what is it? Is the church happy that her children are coming to her or is she lamenting her children or is she crying out saying come to me all you are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest? You stand in humility and silence, yet you speak the loudest. *Who is she who looks forth as the morning, Fair as the moon, Clear as the sun, Awesome as an army with banners? You've been persecuted and wounded and yet you always heal. No weapon formed against you shall prosper, and every tongue which rises against you in judgment You shall condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord, and their righteousness is from Me,” says the Lord. “Take off, O Jerusalem, the garment of your sorrow and troubles, and put on your beauty and the honor of that eternal glory, which you have from God. God will surround you with a double garment of justice, and He will set a crown on your head of everlasting honor. For God will reveal His Splendor in you to all who are under the heaven. For your name will be given to you by God for eternity: the peace of justice and the honor of piety. Arise O Jerusalem, and stand in exaltation, and look around towards, the east, and see your sons, gathering together, from the rising of the sun to the setting of the sun, by the word of the Holy One, rejoicing in the remembrance of God.”* (Baruch 5:1-5) My dear Mother the church, forgive me because I don't love you as I should, as you love me

St. Theophan the recluse urges us that it is necessary to establish a pattern of going to church as often as possible, usually to Praises, Matins, Liturgy and Vespers. Have a longing for this and go there at the first opportunity and if you can, stay without leaving. Our church is heaven on earth. Hasten to church with the faith that it is a place where God dwells, where He Himself promised to quickly hear prayers. Standing in church, be as if you are standing before God in fear and reverence, in the church there should not be any earthly talks for it is truly heaven on earth, which we express through patient standing, prostrations, and attention to the services without wandering thoughts. In the church all our senses get cleansed, our eyes by looking at the icons, our ears by hearing the prayers, our mouths by uttering the prayers, our noses and the air by the incense, our whole body by participating in the prayers in standing and prostrations. See how beautiful our church is. Says St. John Chrysostom about the church *“For what harbor is like the church? What paradise is like our congregation? Here lurks no malevolent snake, rather, Christ the initiator. Here there is no Eve who trips up and casts down, but rather, the church who raises up. Here no leaves of trees exist, rather the fruit of the Spirit. Here there is no partition with thorns, rather Vineyard that flourishes. The ark of Noah saves the people from the flood, so also the church saves us from the flood of this world. Our souls are like a dove that could not find rest for her feet so it went back to the ark, so also, we will only*

find rest in the church. For this reason, one would not make a mistake to call the church superior to the ark of Noah. For example, a hawk entered the ark and left as a hawk. A wolf entered the ark and left as a wolf. But here in the church one enters as a hawk and exits as a dove. A wolf enters and leaves as a sheep. A snake comes and leaves as a lamb, not because nature is altered, but because wickedness is expelled through repentance. Have you sinned? Enter into the church and wipe away your sin. Because the church is a hospital, not a court of justice. As long as we are in the ship, even if a storm rises, we are safe for in the church God is, but out of the church we are in danger of drowning. For us to enjoy the life in the church, we have to live in humility and a life of repentance.

The church is the place of transfiguration, here in the church God is seen. The mountain where Isaac was being offered as a sacrifice, so also the church is the mountain where our true sacrifice is being slain. Would you like to see the cross on which our lord was crucified? we have it here in the church, look upon the altar for that is the cross where our true sacrifice is being offered. Let us hasten to come to church with longing and reverence for in it we will learn innocence and purity, and what meekness is and what love is. In it we will find a place in life and the purpose of our existence. In it we will receive hope, and this hope will make us strong. In it we will receive faith, and this faith Will save us. In it we will receive love, and this love Will make us good. We are in Christ's church when we uplift someone bent down and sorrow, we are in Christ's Church when we cry out Lord help me. We are in Christ's Church when we are patient and good, when we refuse to get angry with our brother even if he has wounded our feelings. We are in Christ's Church when we pray Lord forgive him, when we repay evil with Love.

Blessed is the monk who always lives near the temple of God! He lives near heaven, near paradise, near salvation. Let us not reject the salvation That the merciful God gave to us, so to speak, into our very hands. Specially monks must attend Church without delay, because in their mature years of exhaustion, when both their years and sicknesses well confine a monk to his cell, he will then be nourished with that spiritual reserve that he gathered during his years of youth and strength, when he cleaved to the house of God. For blessed are all who dwell in Your house, praising you forever and ever.