



**Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States**  
**Monthly Message for the Monastic**  
**December 2021**

**Monasticism Is a Life of Martyrdom**

An elder once said “Martyrs suffered death which came to them, but monks die every day willingly when they live their vow honestly. Monasticism is real death to the self which is greater than being killed because monks put to death their self and ego everyday”

The martyr sheds his blood for Christ at once, and the monk offers it drop by drop through his asceticism and a life of struggle, and continuous praise to God. As St. Augustine says: Those who have become true followers of Christ our Savior all crucify their bodies, always preoccupied with labors and struggles for piety, and by mortifying the body. Victory over passions is a self-inflicted spiritual martyrdom. The monk is a living martyr who has abandoned the glory of the ephemeral world, he is a martyr of divine love, he enters his cell and offers himself as a sacrifice every day, even every minute. The life of a monk is a life of repentance, prayer, and self-denial in vigils and tears. Christ asks, then, that we deny ourselves in the sense that we deny the false self—the selfish ego and the passionate desires that seem to be who we are but which are merely distortions that mask our deeper, truer being. Christ asks that we deny ourselves so that we can find ourselves. He tells us, “The ego must go, your passions and selfish desires cannot reign in you if I am to reign in your heart.” The way of self-denial is the way of the Cross. To strip the passions of their power is neither easy nor painless. And it’s not a one-time deal, but a constant, life-long struggle. As our true self is being uncovered, the false, egotistical self constantly struggles to win out, and the heart is the battleground where we fight this war.

It is said that Saint Anthony the great left the desert for Alexandria to support the martyrs in the trials in court under Diocletian, and that after the martyrdom of Saint Peter the seal of martyrs, he went back to his monastery to resume his own daily martyrdom. The honor of this martyrdom has been granted to us as long as we live. By our voluntary daily death, witnessing to Christ in love and honor, for Him who has died for us. In all honesty there exists no work that can match the act of voluntary death. In this act, man crucifies himself on the cross of Christ. Each of man's works either ends in death or turns into death except for voluntary self-crucifixion, which ends in life and turns into life. I tell you a secret, each time a man dies to his own self, each time he denies it and renounce it in honor of Christ’s cross and in love for his redemptive person, he undergoes further adherence to the crucified Lord. Monks are ones who ascend on the cross daily and willingly.

Every martyr, beloved brethren, died to himself once and for all in faith. The edge of the sword, red with blood, bears witness to this. The monk who is faithful to his monastic habit and to his godly call offers his own self, slaughtered by the sword of obedience to

God's Word every day; not just once, but numerous times. It was, therefore, necessary that the sacrifice first be killed by a priest. After it died, it was cut in pieces and seasoned with salt, then placed on the fire. Unless the priest first kills the lamb, it is not salted nor is it brought to the Lord as a burnt offering. Similarly, also our soul must approach the High Priest Christ to be slain by him and die to its own thoughts and the wicked life which it was living, that is, to die to sin. Thus, the life of wicked passions must go out of it. Just as the body, after the soul has left it, is dead and has no longer life in it as it had before (neither does it hear nor walk), so after Christ, the Heavenly High Priest, by the grace of his power, puts to death our life to the world, it dies to the life of corruption that it formerly lived. It no longer hears nor speaks nor moves about in the darkness of sin because the evil passions which possessed the soul have by grace left it.

Thus, the Apostle exclaims, saying: "The world is crucified to me and I to the world" (Gal 6:14). The soul, therefore, that wishes to live with God in rest and eternal light must approach, as we said above, to the true High Priest, Christ, and be slain and die to the world and to its former life of darkness and wickedness and be transported into another life to enter into a divine communication. When someone dies in a city, he is unable to hear the voices of others around him. He does not hear their conversation nor the sounds they make, but he is completely dead and is transported to another place where there are no voices, none of the noises of the city. In a like manner the soul, after it has been slain and dead to that city of evil passions where it once earlier lived, hears no longer in itself the voice of the darkened thoughts. It no longer hears the conversation and the noise of frivolous arguments or of the noisy crowd of the spirits of darkness. For it is transported to the city full of goodness and peace, to the city of divine light. There it lives and listens, there it converses, speaks, and reasons. There it performs spiritual works very worthy of God. Let us, therefore, pray that we may be put to death by his power and die to the world of the wickedness of darkness and that the spirit of sin may be extinguished in us. Let us put on and receive the soul of the heavenly Spirit and be transported from the wickedness of darkness into the light of Christ.<sup>1</sup>

He thus enjoys another life that is not of this world, and cries out of his depths triumphantly with St Paul, "For Your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter" (Rom 8:36). If there exists a mystical privilege that distinguishes the monastic life in particular from other kinds of life, it lies in the opportunities this life offers for voluntary death to the world all day and night, and even all lifelong. The fathers have mastered this in various ways and means. The monk is a man who lives out his own crucifixion in all determination and awe, in all persistence and ingenuity, in all self-control and silence. His only rest comes through attaining complete death and his only peace in annihilating his own ego. What survives in their stead is sincere, unadulterated Love that sprouts the joy of Christ. Such joy tramples death underfoot and is not concerned in people's praise and admiration. Martyrdom is our daily job (1cor 15-31). The church celebrates the memory of the martyrs once a year to honor their spirits, yet we live it out twenty-four hours a day for our whole lives. It is said concerning many of the martyrs, that when they foreknew, either by revelation or by information received from one of their friends, the day on which they were to receive the crown of martyrdom, they did not taste

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<sup>1</sup> St. Macarius, PSEUDO-MACARIUS THE FIFTY SPIRITUAL HOMILIES AND THE GREAT LETTER (Paulist Press), Homily 1, PP. 33-34

anything the preceding night, but from evening till morning they stood keeping vigil in prayer, glorifying God and psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs, and they looked forward to that hour with joy and exultation, waiting to meet the sword in there fast as those prepared for weddings. Therefore let us also be vigilant, we who are called to an unseen martyrdom so as to receive the crowns of sanctification, so that we may never give our enemies a sign of denial with any member or part of our body, but having our senses without and our thoughts within clothed with the whole armor of God, let us strenuously take this crown and enter into His glory with the holy martyrs, and stir our foes with astonishment; for nobody receives the crown without labor.<sup>2</sup>

As monks we live this unseen martyrdom when we live in obedience, when we accept trials, when we forgive our brethren, when we put to death our passions, when we deny ourselves. St. Moses said he bears injustice for the sake of God is considered a martyr, and St. John Climacus affirms this by saying “blessed is he who is, slandered and despised every day for the Lord's sake, and still restrains himself. He Will be in the chorus of martyrs and will talk familiarly with the Angels. Blessed is the monk who thinks of himself by the hour as having earned all dishonor and contempt. Blessed is he who mortifies his will to the very end and who leaves the care of himself to his elder in the Lord. He will be placed at the right hand of the Crucified.<sup>3</sup> Give yourself over to death in your struggles, rather than live in heedlessness. For martyrs are not only those who have excepted death for their belief in Christ, but also those who die for the sake of keeping His commandments<sup>4</sup>. Don't you now yearn for martyrdom? Aren't you now sad that no opportunity for martyrdom is presently available? On the contrary, let us, too, train ourselves for an opportunity for martyrdom. They despised life. You, despise luxury! They threw their bodies on the fire. You, now throw money in the hands of the poor! They trampled on the burning coals. You, extinguish the flame of desire! These things are difficult, but also rewarding. Don't focus on the present obstacles, but on the future benefits; not on the tortures at hand, but the anticipated blessings; not the sufferings, but the prizes; not the labors, but the crowns; not the sweat expended, but the rewards; not the sorrows, but the returns; not the consuming fire, but the kingdom that lies ahead; not the executioners standing all around, but Christ crowned Don't look at the wealth that's being emptied, but focus on the treasure that's being increased. If you fast, don't reflect on the discomfort from the fasting, but the release that comes from the discomfort. If you spend a sleepless night in prayer, don't reflect on the misery that comes from the lack of sleep, but the boldness that results from the prayer Reflect on how wonderful it is, in the depths of night, when every human being and wild animal and winged creature is asleep, when there is the most profound silence, for you alone to be awake and to converse boldly with the common Master of all. So, sleep is sweet? But nothing is sweeter than praying. If you converse with him one on one, you can accomplish a lot, with no one hassling you or cheating you of your supplication. You also

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<sup>2</sup> Saint Isaac The Syrian, The Ascetical Homilies (Holy Transfiguration Monastery), Homily 37, P. 300

<sup>3</sup> John Climacus, The Ladder of Divine Ascent (Paulist Press), Step 4 On obedience, P. 106

<sup>4</sup> Saint Isaac The Syrian, The Ascetical Homilies (Holy Transfiguration Monastery), Homily 3, PP. 134-135

have time on your side with regard to obtaining what you want. So, you're tossing and turning, lying on a soft mattress, and can't bear the thought of getting up? Reflect on the martyrs lying today on the iron ladder, not with a mattress lying underneath, but live coals strewn under it.<sup>5</sup>

Monasticism as a life of martyrdom is built on love, and for the sake of this love we offer our own selves upon His alter. In joy we surrender our own bodies to death, for by so doing we will find something to sacrifice to our Beloved. We run impetuously along the way of sorrows, bearing the torments of our own heart. We crucify our members and passions contentedly. We drink the bitterness of gall with pleasure. Beloved! You have robbed us of everything, even our own selves. We feel no longer alive, for it was You who lived in us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written: "For Your sake we are killed all day long; We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter." Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:35-39)

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<sup>5</sup> St. John Chrysostom, Homily on Martyrs