



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

**January 2022**

### **On Hope**

An elder once said “A brother who fell into temptation was so distressed that he broke the monastic rule. When he wanted to make a fresh start, he was prevented from doing so by his distress, saying to himself: “When can I find myself as I was before?” Discouraged, he was unable to commence the monastic task, so he came to an elder and explained his situation to him. On hearing about his distress, the elder offered him the following example: “There was a man who had a field, but it had become waste from his neglect and was filled with weeds and thistles. Eventually he thought he would cultivate it; he said to his son: ‘Go and clean up the field.’ His son went to clean it but he became discouraged when he saw the multitude of thistles, saying to himself: ‘When will I ever pull up all those [weeds] and clean up what is here?’ He lay down and began sleeping for several days. Afterwards his father came to see what he had done. Finding that he had accomplished nothing, he said to him: ‘Why have you accomplished nothing until now?’ The young man said to the father: ‘As soon as I began to work, father, I was overwhelmed at the sight of the multitude of the weeds and thistles and, as a result of my distress, laid myself down to sleep.’ His father said to him: ‘My son, do [an area] equivalent to the width of your coverlet each day; that way your work will progress, and you will not be discouraged.’ On hearing this, he did so, and, in short time, the field was cleaned up. So too do you, brother, work little by little; you will not be discouraged, and God of his charity will restore you to your former state.” On hearing this and patiently staying [there], the brother began doing as he had been taught by the elder and, by the grace of Christ, he found repose.”

“At the beginning of the road of repentance Satan confronts man with despair. On one hand he makes the road of repentance hard for man and on the other hand he uncovers his past which contains terrible sins. Satan does his best to let man fall into despair, so that he returns back to sin. At this stage hope is very useful for man; Satan pulls him backward and hope gives him a good push forward. Judas Iscariot and Simon Peter committed terrible sins; the former sold his Master for thirty pieces of silver and the latter denied Christ and blasphemed with curses and swearing in front of an ordinary servant girl, not even in front of a ruler, governor or a king. Yet Simon Peter realized his sin, was terribly sorrowful, and wept bitterly. The Lord accepted him and restored him to his Apostolic status by telling him: “Feed My Lambs ..., Tend My sheep ..., Feed My sheep” (John 21:15, 16, 17). Yet Judas Iscariot lost his hope.

Peter expressed his hope in his first Epistle by saying: "Rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you" (1 Peter 1:13) and "Sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear" (1 Peter 3:15). The Book "Paradise of the Monks" mentions a story of a brother who lived in a monastery and used to fall many times into the sin of adultery. He hated himself and was ready to leave the monastic life. Yet he was careful to complete his daily worship by saying the Psalms, fasting and prostration. In his prayer he used to say: "Lord, You see my bad state and my sadness, pull me up Lord whether I want it or not. I am like mire; I desire sin and I like it. But You are strong Lord, make me abstain from this filth. It would be strange if You have mercy on the saints only, or You only save the pure who deserve to be saved. Show Your amazing work of mercy in me who is not worthy. I submit myself to You". He used to say this prayer every day whether he sinned or not. One day Satan was irritated by his hopefulness and appeared to him when he was reading his Psalms and said to him: "Are you not ashamed to stand between the hands of God and call His name with your unclean lips?". The brother replied: "You do one thing and I do another thing. You let me fall in sin and I ask the Merciful God to have compassion on me. I fight you in this manner until death reaches me and I do not abandon my hope in my Lord. I do not cease preparing myself to stand against you and we shall see who will win, you or the mercy of God". When the devil heard that he said to him: "From now on I shall not wage a war against you, in order not for you to win a crown because of your hope in your God", and the devil left him from that day. The brother came back to himself and wept bitterly for his past sins. Whenever he felt haughty, he used to remember his past sins and whenever he felt in despair he hoped in God and remembered His love to sinners. St. Augustine said: "If sin is not pulled out of you, hope in forgiveness should not be pulled out of you. The waves of the sea trouble us, yet we drop our anchors on the land of hope".

Hope is one of the great virtues - faith, hope and love (1 Corinthians 13:13). Faith begets hope and he who has hope in God loves Him. And by love, one reaches the summit of his relationship with God. Hence, we see the strong ties between the three great virtues. It is not possible to separate them, though it is possible to distinguish between them. Love depends on faith and hope, faith depends on hope and love, and hope depends on faith and love. The importance of hope is obvious, since he who loses hope loses everything with it, even life itself. That is, when he loses hope he falls into despair and depression. It is hope which pushes man to toil and strive, whether in his physical or spiritual life. If the feeling of hopelessness and despair get hold of him, he will completely stop working and striving. Thus, hope is a driving force in the life of man. As hope is tied to faith and love, it is also tied to joy. One may fall into a certain sin yet hope fills him with the Spirit and as a result his sadness disappears and is replaced with joy. Hope is a free gift from God. The Apostle Paul says: "Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and our God and Father, who has loved us and given us everlasting consolation and good hope by grace, comfort your hearts and establish you in every good word and work" (2 Thessalonians 2:16, 17).

Hope brings peace and joy to the heart, as the Apostle Paul says to the Romans: "Rejoicing in hope" (Romans 12:12). Sin takes away the peace from the soul and lack

of hope causes anxiety. Hope calms down the heart and replaces sadness with joy and fills the heart with comfort. St. Augustine says: "Hope is necessary for you as you travel and is a comfort on the road. When you get tired you remember that after sometimes you will reach your destination. If you take away the hope of arriving, you soon lose your energy and will be unable to continue. You do now what you hope will be fruitful and that you will enjoy these fruits. You are happy when you strive, and you are even happier when you reap the harvest. If hope has this sweetness, reality is sweeter".<sup>1</sup>

"Let us be diligent and watchful in God's service and often think of why you left the world and came here. Was it not that you might live for God and become a spiritual man? Strive earnestly for perfection, then, because in a short time you will receive the reward of your labor, and neither fear nor sorrow shall come upon you at the hour of death. Labor a little now, and soon you shall find great rest, in truth, eternal joy; for if you continue faithful and diligent in doing, God will undoubtedly be faithful and generous in rewarding. Continue to have reasonable hope of gaining salvation, but do not act as though you were certain of it lest you grow indolent and proud. One day when a certain man who wavered often and anxiously between hope and fear was struck with sadness, he knelt in humble prayer before the altar of a church. While meditating on these things, he said: "Oh if I but knew whether I should persevere to the end!" Instantly he heard within the divine answer: "If you knew this, what would you do? Do now what you would do then, and you will be quite secure." Immediately consoled and comforted, he resigned himself to the divine will and the anxious uncertainty ceased. His curiosity no longer sought to know what the future held for him, and he tried instead to find the perfect, the acceptable will of God in the beginning and end of every good work.<sup>2</sup> "This is the foundation of the road to God, in much patience, in hope, in humility, in poverty of spirit, in gentleness to travel along the road of life."<sup>3</sup>

As "Abba Poeman said that every day he made a new beginning." "My God do not abandon me. I have done nothing good before Thee, but grant me, in Thy compassion, the power to make a start" Let us forget the things behind and press forward, never losing hope and let us ask God to bring us to a Good start in this year through hope. Just like the Potter in Jeremiah God is able to make us a new vessel ready for his Grace, and also Isaiah says, "But those who wait on the Lord Shall renew their strength; They shall mount up with wings like eagles. They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint." For our God is the hope of those who have no hope and the help of those who have no helper.

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<sup>1</sup> Paradise of the Spirit, His Grace Bishop Youanis of Gharbia on Hope

<sup>2</sup> Imitation of Christ

<sup>3</sup> St. Macarius, PSEUDO-MACARIUS THE FIFTY SPIRITUAL HOMILIES AND THE GREAT LETTER (Paulist Press), Homily 27