



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

June 2022

On Enlightenment

It was said about St. Didymus that he lost the use of his eyes when he was four years old, yet he became one of the most learned men of his period. He prayed earnestly in his youth, we are told by Rufinus, not for the sight of his bodily eyes, but for illumination of the heart. He admitted to St. Anthony that the loss of his sight was a grief to him; the saint replied to him do not grief about loss of that which you had in common with ants and flies and gnats, and to rather rejoice that you possess a spiritual sight like that of the saints and Apostles. St. Jerome indeed habitually spoke of him not as “the blind” but as “the Seer”. St. Didymus studied with ardor, and his vigils were long and frequent, not for reading but for listening, that he might gain by hearing what others obtain by seeing. Being enlightened is to have our inner senses trained to discern between what is good and what is evil. As St. Anthony said that the greatest virtue is Discernment, and enlightenment and discernment are linked very closely to each other. Among beginners, discernment is real self-knowledge; among those midway along the road to perfection, it is spiritual capacity to distinguish unfailingly between what it's truly a good and what in nature is opposed to the good; among the perfect, it is a knowledge resulting from divine illumination, which with its lamp can light up what is dark and others. To put the matter generally, discernment is and is recognized to be a solid understanding of the will of God in all times, in all places, in all things; and it is found only among those who are pure in heart, in body, and in speech.¹ Truly, the greatest knowledge is the knowledge of the will of God, the greatest courage is submission to the will of God, and the greatest act is to accomplish the will of God.²

¹ John Climacus, *The Ladder Of Divine Ascent* (Paulist Press), Step 26 On Discernment, P. 229

² Fr. Manasseh Youhanna. *The Crucified Jesus*. St Shenouda Monastery. Chapter 1, P. 23

Here is what the Great St. Anthony says about Discernment (Enlightenment): “And so I remember that while I was still a boy, in the region of Thebaid, where the blessed Antony lived, the elders came to him to inquire about perfection: and though the conference lasted from evening till morning, the greatest part of the night was taken up with this question. For it was discussed at great length what virtue or observance could preserve a monk always unharmed by the snares and deceits of the devil, and carry him forward on a sure and right path, and with firm step to the heights of perfection. And when each one gave his opinion according to the bent of his own mind, and some made it consist in zeal in fasting and vigils, because a soul that has been brought low by these, and so obtained purity of heart and body will be the more easily united to God, others in despising all things, as, if the mind were utterly deprived of them, it would come the more freely to God, as if henceforth there were no snares to entangle it: others thought that withdrawal from the world was the thing needful, i.e., solitude and the secrecy of the hermit’s life; living in which a man may more readily commune with God, and cling more especially to Him; others laid down that the duties of charity, i.e., of kindness should be practiced, because the Lord in the gospel promised more especially to give the kingdom to these; when He said: “*Come ye blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was an hungered and ye gave Me to eat, I was thirsty and ye gave Me to drink, etc.*”, and when in this fashion they declared that by means of different virtues a more certain approach to God could be secured, and the greater part of the night had been spent in this discussion, then at last the blessed Antony spoke and said: All these things which you have mentioned are indeed needful, and helpful to those who are thirsting for God, and desirous to approach Him. But countless accidents and the experience of many people will not allow us to make the most important of gifts consist in them. For often when men are most strict in fasting or in vigils, and nobly withdraw into solitude, and aim at depriving themselves of all their goods so absolutely that they do not suffer even a day’s allowance of food or a single penny to remain to them, and when they fulfil all the duties of kindness with the utmost devotion, yet still we have seen them suddenly deceived, so that they could not bring the work they had entered upon to a suitable close, but brought their exalted fervor and praiseworthy manner of life to a terrible end. Wherefore we shall be able clearly to recognize what it is which mainly leads to God, if we trace out with greater care the reason of their downfall and deception. For when the works of the above-mentioned virtues were abounding in them, discretion alone was wanting, and allowed them not to continue even to the end. Nor can any other reason for their falling off be discovered except that as they were not sufficiently instructed by their elders they could not obtain

judgment and discretion, which passing by excess on either side, teaches a monk always to walk along the royal road, and does not suffer him to be puffed up on the right hand of virtue, i.e. from excess of zeal to transgress the bounds of due moderation in foolish presumption, nor allows him to be enamored of slackness and turn aside to the vices on the left hand, i.e. under pretext of controlling the body, to grow slack with the opposite spirit of lukewarmness. For this is discretion, which is termed in the gospel the “eye,” “and light of the body,” according to the Savior’s saying: “*The light of thy body is thine eye: but if thine eye be single, thy whole body will be full of light, but if thine eye be evil, thy whole body will be full of darkness*”. Because as it discerns all the thoughts and actions of men, it sees and overlooks all things which should be done. But if in any man this is “evil,” i.e. not fortified by sound judgment and knowledge, or deceived by some error and presumption, it will make our whole body “full of darkness,” i.e., it will darken all our mental vision and our actions, as they will be involved in the darkness of vices and the gloom of disturbances. For, He says, “*If the light which is in thee be darkness, how great will that darkness be!*” For no one can doubt that when the judgment of our heart goes wrong, and is overwhelmed by the night of ignorance, our thoughts and deeds, which are the result of deliberation and discretion, must be involved in the darkness of still greater sins.³

True discretion, is only secured by true humility. And of this humility the first proof is given by reserving everything (not only what you do but also what you think), for the scrutiny of the elders, so as not to trust at all in your own judgment but to acquiesce in their decisions in all points, and to acknowledge what ought to be considered good or bad by their traditions. And this habit will not only teach a young man to walk in the right path through the true way of discretion, but will also keep him unhurt by all the crafts and deceits of the enemy. For a man cannot possibly be deceived, who lives not by his own judgment but according to the example of the elders, nor will our crafty foe be able to abuse the ignorance of one who is not accustomed from false modesty to conceal all the thoughts which rise in his heart, but either checks them or suffers them to remain, in accordance with the ripened judgment of the elders. For a wrong thought is enfeebled at the moment that it is discovered: and even before the sentence of discretion has been given, the foul serpent is by the power of confession dragged out, so to speak, from his dark under-ground cavern, and in some sense shown up and sent away in

³ John Cassian. John Cassian Collection [4 Books] . Aeterna Press

disgrace. For evil thoughts will hold sway in us just so long as they are hidden in the heart.

That's why the apostle St. Paul was praying to the Ephesians to be enlightened and to have this spiritual discernment, "*I do not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers: that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power.*" (Eph 1:16-20)

Being in darkness is like holding onto a sharp object and not letting it go but holding onto it tighter. But to be enlightened is to let go of what's evil easily and doing what is good and right with inner peace without having this war of the old man inside. To be enlightened, we have to have a relationship with God, with YOU we reach to YOU as we sing, *with Your light we shall see light*. It is to have our senses trained to discern between good and evil, sin darkens the mind, what company does the light have with darkness. So, repentance also gives us enlightenment.

This is what the Apostle said: "*We are not sons of the night nor of the darkness, for you all are sons of light and sons of the day*" (1Thes 5:5). And just as in that other state of error the old man put off the whole, complete man and wears the garment of the kingdom of darkness, the cloak of blasphemy, unbelief, audacity, vainglory, pride, avarice, concupiscence, and all the other similar adornments of the kingdom of darkness, ragged, impure, and contaminated, so here, on the contrary, all who have put off the old and earthly man and from whom Jesus has removed the clothing of the kingdom of darkness have put on the new and heavenly man, Jesus Christ, so that once again the eyes are joined to new eyes, ears to ears, head-to-head, to be completely pure and bearing the heavenly image. And the Lord has clothed them with the garments of the kingdom of unspeakable light, the garment of faith, hope, love, joy, peace, goodness, human warmth, and all the other divine and living garments of light, life, and ineffable tranquility. The result is that, as God is love and joy and peace and kindness and goodness, so too the new man may become by grace. And just as the kingdom of darkness and sin are hidden in the soul until the day of resurrection when the very body of sinners will be covered over with the darkness that is now hidden in the soul, so also the kingdom of light and the heavenly Image, Jesus Christ, now mystically illumines the soul and holds dominion in the souls of the saints. Indeed, Christ

is hidden from the eyes of men. Only with the eyes of the soul is he truly seen, until the day of resurrection, when even the body itself - will reign with the soul, which now, having attained the Kingdom of Christ, rests and is illumined by the divine life. Glory to his compassion and mercy because he shows pity on his servants, illumines and frees them from the kingdom of darkness. And he bestows on them light and his kingdom. To him be glory and power forever and ever. Amen.⁴

⁴ St. Macarius, PSEUDO-MACARIUS THE FIFTY SPIRITUAL HOMILIES AND THE GREAT LETTER (Paulist Press), Homily 2, P. 37