



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

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On The Monastic Garb

St. Anthony was sitting with the brethren one time and said to them “let us struggle for even the garb of the monk is hated by the devil, one time I wanted to test them concerning this matter, so I took my monastic garb and my head cover and put it on a stick, then I saw the devils coming from a far and shot arrows at it. I spoke to them and told him what are you doing, this is not a human being? They answered me and said we know, and we are not shooting the arrows at it but at the clothing, then I spoke to them once again and asked them; what kind of harm are the clothing of a monk are doing to you? They answered me and said: they are the weapons of those who we suffer from and of those who are wrestling with us, for this reason even their clothing we hate and troublesome to us.”¹

Where could we better begin, with God’s help, than with the very garb of the monks? After having exposed their outward appearance to view we shall then be able to discuss, in logical sequence, their inner worship. And so, it is proper for a monk always to dress like a soldier of Christ, ever ready for battle, his loins girded.² Our habit is made up of a tunic with short sleeves, a belt of leather, a garment and head covering. Each of these is a symbol and we should understand what they mean. Why do we put on a tunic with short sleeves when there are others who wear them long? Long sleeves are a symbol of hands. Hands are given to us to labor. When the thought comes into our mind to do anything belonging to the old man, i.e., stealing, hitting someone, it is in fact to do something sinful with our hands. We should give heed to our habit and take note that we do not have long sleeves. Thus, we have no hands for doing the work of unredeemed men. There is another symbol involved in the tunic. It has a purple mark and what is this mark a symbol of? Anyone who fights for a king has a purple on his clothing. This is because a king is robed with purple and all those who battle on his side put purple on their

¹ Arabic Paradise of the Fathers (St. Macarius Monastery) 1st part, p.89.

² John Cassian, The Institutes (NewMan Press), First Book, P.21

clothing. This is the regal uniform which displays our commitment to fight for Christ, our King, and that we want to suffer for him all the tribulations he endured for us. Because when Our Master was suffering on account of us, he wore a purple robe, primarily as a king, because he is the King of kings and the Lord of lords. But then also because he was mocked by ungodly soldiers. So also having purple for a sign, we promise, as I stated before, to endure all that he suffered. A soldier does not forsake his service and leave secretly to become a farmer or a businessman, because that would make him dishonorable. As the apostle stated, "No one fighting for God entangles himself with worldly business," so that he is able to satisfy the One who he has committed himself to. So also, we should struggle, leaving aside world matters, and to be engaged with God only, and as it says, to be like "A maiden who is both dedicated and without distraction."

In addition, we have a belt, but why do we use it? The belt we wear is a symbol foremost that we are prepared for our labor. Everyone who desires to work first girds himself so that he is not impeded by his garment. As the apostle says, "They stood with their loins girded." Also, the belt is made from deer hide, which is a sign of our body being put to death, and so we should also mortify our carnal lusts. The belt is girded around the loins, from where carnal pleasures are said to proceed. This is what the apostle declares, "Put to death your members on the earth against fornication and defilement."

We also put on a scapular, which is put around our shoulders, this is a sign of a cross on our shoulders. As he said, "Take up your cross and follow me." What is the cross, but the complete mortification erected by our faith in Christ. Because faith, as the teaching of the fathers says, "always moves past hindrances and liberates us from the work which leads us to this perfect mortification." That is, that a man put to death in himself the love of the things of this world. He has forsaken parents, goods, riches, all that a man can renounce to take up the struggle. May he also forsake his will and the lust for these things. This is what we mean by our perfect renunciation.

We also put on a cowl or hood. This is a sign of humiliation. Small ones, not mature men, wear the cowl without enmity. We wear the cowl for this cause, that we might be children in hostility. As the apostle states, "Do not be children in understanding, but be children in malice." What does it mean to be children in malice? A babe has no ill-will. If he is not treated with dignity, he does not get angry. If he is honored, he does not become arrogant. If he is deprived of his goods he is not disturbed. To be a child in enmity implies having no interest in revenge or glory. Again, the hood is a mark of God's grace, for as the cowl covers and warms the head of a child, so also the

grace of God blankets the mind, as the book of the fathers, states, "that the cowl is a symbol of the grace of God our Savior, our guide, our childhood in Christ, because of the devil's regular attempts to strike and wound us. And thus, we have girded about us the belt which is the mortification of senseless passions. On our shoulders is the scapular which is our cross, and there is the hood which is the mark of purity and childhood in Christ.

This is truly the power of our monastic clothing, our garment is of righteousness and is a shield of light, our head covering is of humility and a helmet of salvation, our belt is to crush our desires. Let us have reverence towards our Monastic Garb for it terrifies the evil ones. May we lead a life in accord with our image, as the fathers have said, for fear we take on a character at odds with it. But since we have forsaken great things let us forsake the little ones as well. As we have forsaken the world, let us renounce our passionate attachment to it. ³

³ Dorotheos Of Gaza, Discourses & Sayings (Cistercian Publications) On Renunciation, PP. 86-88