



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States
Monthly Message for the Monastic
September 2022

Meaning Of the Cross In The Monastic Life

The Cross is the door to mysteries. Through this door the mind makes entrance into the knowledge of heavenly mysteries. The knowledge of the cross is concealed in the sufferings of the cross. And the more our participation in it's sufferings, the greater the perception we gain through the cross. For, as the apostle says, 'as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds by Christ.'¹

The Lord said to his disciples: "if anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me." Remember also each of us has his own cross, which he has to carry in answer to the call of God to follow Him and upon which he has to be crucified like Christ Himself, according to the example of the Apostle. The Golgotha of this cross is our heart: it is lifted or implanted through a zealous determination to live according to the spirit of God; and it is composed of different dispositions of our heart, foremost and flowing in the Christian life.

A true monk never runs away from his cross, but he embraces it and ascends on the cross willingly and daily. The meaning of our inner across and how it relates to our monastic life is the lower part of the cross, which enters into the ground. The inner cross represents self-denial, which breaks the ground of the heart and implants the cross. Denial of oneself in the monastic life, this activity takes on a new aspect of mortifying oneself to the whole world. The monk is then like a dead person, buried in the ground. The monastery walls are his grave. His clothes are his shroud. He leaves everything outside the monastery walls and has no relationship to an existing thing. He is foreign to everything and everything is foreign to him, so that the words of the Apostle, the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world are fulfilled in him. He who has acquired such a disposition has laid a solid foundation of his inner cross and monastic life.

¹ Saint Isaac The Syrian, The Ascetical Homilies (Holy Transfiguration Monastery), Homily 74, P. 513

The upper part of the inner cross- the part which goes upwards, represents patience, that is, a firmness to stand in our intention so that no obstacles, discontentment or labors can make us waver. Without patience, no one can persist in goodness, even less the monk and his monastic life. It is the firmness to remain in our rank and in our place. For doing so, every step means practicing patience; therefore, one cannot make a step without patience.

The horizontal section of the inner cross represents obedience: such a disposition whereby a person never undertakes or plans anything on his own but simply listens and fulfills without contradiction the orders of others. The obedient one not relying on his own thoughts or wishes; he follows someone else's advice or command. In order to follow Christ, let us first renounce our own reason. The Fathers have established that psalmody is a weapon, and that prayer is a wall, and sincere tears are a cleansing. But holy obedience is in their judgment a declaration of faith, the absence of which will not allow anyone to see the Lord who is under the power of his passions.

Someone might ask, "But what kind of life is that?" Detachment from everything, denial of one's own will in obedience, suppression of almost all feeling in endurance- is that life?! But don't stop only at the externals. Each of the above-mentioned monastic virtues has, in addition to its external, stern aspect, an inner side which is alive and joyful, and which either predisposes one for it or develops from it.

Thus, patience is supported by and lives in the hope that monastic labor is not in vain. Foretasting expected blessings, hope nourishes patience and makes it inexhaustible. Hope fills the heart with the joy of certain possession of that for which it waits, and this joy alleviates the painful effort of patience caused by labors. Therefore, the enduring person rejoices, and feels not so much suffering as delight, although others see him suffering greatly.

Obedience is animated by love. Obedience is the renunciation of one's own activities and reasoning our most precious actions. One must have great strength to gain mastery over himself and deny himself these things. With strength of will one can, of course, overcome himself, and firm determination succeeds in this. However, as long as this determination works alone, acts of obedience are like the cracking of dry branches. Only love can powerfully add sound flexibility to obedience. Love is ready to sacrifice everything, is not sparing of labor, does not take into account loss of time, effort or means. Where there is love, everything is done easily, quickly and willingly. Only obedience that comes from love can render joyful all the labors to which it is assigned.

Finally, mortification of oneself to the world is vivified and occasioned by the faith that it must be only this and cannot be otherwise, if the one wishing this life wants to live it the way he ought. Holy faith tells us that we were created for life in God, but that we fell away from Him into the bonds of selfishness and worldly charms, and that, because of this, one who wishes to rise again to life in God must die to himself and to the world. This conviction of the inevitability of such a course, as long as one has a living desire for good for oneself, nourishes mortification to everything and grants one life, especially in connection with the conviction that only by such a disposition can one come close to Christ, draw forth from Him fullness of life.

In this way, faith with self-denial, or dying to everything, constitutes the base of the inner cross; the upright portion is patience strengthened by hope, while the crossbar is obedience inspired by love.

If we imagine the cross as a tree, then its root is faith, from which grows first of all self-denial and the determination to abandon everything and to concentrate on the sole task of the salvation of one's soul, withdrawing from all else. From self-denial is born love, prepared for every obedience; from obedience-or simultaneously with it- grows patience, crowned with hope that raises one to heaven and into the inner sanctum behind the veil, as the Apostle says. Where all these dispositions are found, the tree of the cross does not stand alone and bare, but branches out into many shoots of various virtues, covering itself with the leaves of outward good behavior and abounding in the fruits of good deeds. There is found forgetfulness of the world and its customs; there is uninterrupted abiding in the monastery without departure; there is love of solitude; there is prayerful labor in the cell and in church; there is fasting there is persisting in handiwork; there is readiness to help one another; there is mutual forgiveness; there is mutual encouragement to goodness; there is peace; there is restraint of the eyes, tongue and ears; and so forth. Blessed is the soul which, withdrawing into itself, would find all of this in its heart!

This is the evident sign that the tree of the cross has been founded therein, firmly established and abundant with living inner strength, so that it can indeed be called a life-giving tree, not only in general, but specifically for that heart. If all the virtues we have mentioned are really in our hearts, then our cross stands upright. If not, then know that it has been buried under opposing bad feelings and dispositions. I won't specify the latter, because they are self-evident. But I can't help adding the wish or rather request that, if you find that your cross has bent over or has completely fallen down, or, even worse, has been covered with the dust and litter of bad thoughts and desires, then try to uncover it, clean it with repentance and raise and affix it once more

in your heart, with the firm determination to be zealous until death for the salvation of your soul. Believe me, without this cross, there is neither spiritual life, nor any consolation. Without the cross, no one has been saved or can be saved. Just as the Lord entered into glory after having suffered on the Cross, so all those who follow Him will enter into glory together with Him through their own personal cross. Do you wish to partake of this glory? Then, first of all, ascend the cross--and from the cross you shall enter Heaven. Amen.²

² St. Theophan The Recluse