



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

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Monk's Cell

A brother came to Scetis to visit Abba Moses and asked him for a word. The old man said to him, ‘Go, sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything’

In the desert tradition, the monastic cell was called “the furnace of Babylon where the three children found the Son of God” or “the pillar of cloud where God spoke with Moses.” In the solitude of the cell, the monk encounters God. The monastic cell is the monastery in miniature, the monastery reduced to its basic components: solitude, silence, and the Spirit of God. In that sacred space that is both the physical cell and the monk’s heart, one can be occupied with God, listen to God. The enclosure of the physical cell leads the occupant to look within, to face himself. That means facing the reality of who we are, including our history and our need for divine mercy. In my monastic cell, in the presence of the Lord, I sit as Mary sat at the feet of Jesus (Luke 10:39). Sitting is not so much a matter of posture as of attitude, the readiness to dwell, to remain, to abide steadfastly in the presence of the Lord. Initially the monastic cell might indeed seem too much like a prison cell, a place where I cannot bear to stay. I am not yet prepared to meet the cell’s demand for interiority, for facing myself in all my poverty and for facing the Lord. I would prefer to go anywhere else, go for a walk, go and see what others are doing. It takes time to appreciate one’s cell as a true sanctuary of the presence of God. It is by spending prayer time in the cell that the sense of God’s presence there intensifies.

The Desert Fathers and Mothers insisted on steadfastness in the cell: “Someone said to Abba Arsenius, ‘My thoughts trouble me, saying, “You can neither fast nor work; at least go and visit the sick, for that is also charity.”’ But the old man, recognizing the suggestions of the demons, said to him, ‘do not leave your cell.’ For he knew that steadfastness in the cell keeps a monk in the right way.” Running away is not the solution; I only carry with me the difficulties that surface in solitude. Steadfastness in the cell means that here I have chosen to take my stand until I learn to live with myself, with all my faults and failings, my emptiness and unfulfillment, as I wait in patience for the mercy of God to heal me and fill my heart and my cell with peace. The cell is the place where I hold my ground until I discover who I am and what I am called to do.

The spiritual elders of Egyptian monasticism promised their disciples that “your cell will teach you everything.” So, it will, but I must not expect to learn everything in a single day. I will give my cell time, abiding there, waiting patiently until I can discern the subtle presence of God and hear his word in my heart. Abba Ammonas said, “A man may remain for a hundred years in his cell without learning how to live in the cell.” To live in the cell means to abide there faithfully and fruitfully. Time spent rearranging the furniture and reorganizing everything on the bookshelves does not exactly count. Steadfastness in the cell requires a docile, trusting attitude that gives the cell time to teach me everything and bring me fully to life. Dwelling in the cell and deepening my prayerful presence to God are fruitful not only for me but also for the life and salvation of others.

St. Isaac the Syrian said ‘A bird, wherever it may be, hastens back to its nest, there to hatch its young; and a monk possessing discernment hastens to his cell, there to produce the fruit of life’ life of this world is sweet to the man who lives it in a carnal manner, but not so sweet as separation from life to the man who separates himself by perception in God. Unless a tree first sheds its old leaves, it cannot grow new shoots; and until a solitary casts out from his heart the memory of his former actions, he cannot bear new fruit and sprout new shoots in Jesus Christ. Wind ripens the fruits of trees, and the Spirit of God, the fruits of the soul. They say that in a shell, where a pearl is born, lightning produces a kind of spark and the shell receives substance [for the pearl] from the air, whereas until then it is ordinary flesh; and until a monk's heart receives the heavenly substance through perception, its labor remains ordinary, and its shell holds no fruit of consolation. The fruits of trees are hard, repugnant to the taste, and unfit for consumption until the sweetness that comes from the sun has fallen upon them. Even so the first labors of repentance are bitter and extremely repugnant, and they give the solitary no consolation until they receive the sweetness that comes from divine vision, which translates the heart from earthly things such that it even forgets itself. Know, brother, that the reason that we must remain within the door of our cell is to be ignorant of the wicked deeds of men, and thus, seeing all as holy and good, we shall attain to purity of mind. But if we become castigators, chastisers, judges, investigators, vindicators, and faultfinders, in what respect does our life differ from the life in the towns? If you have no stillness in your heart, at least still your tongue. If you cannot give right ordering to your thoughts, at least give right ordering to your senses. If you cannot be solitary in your mind, at least be solitary in body.

On the other hand, my cell can become a meeting place where those who belong to a small group sometimes gather to socialize. St. Isaac says ‘If you have possessions, distribute them at once; but if you have none, do not desire any. Sweep your cell clean of every delicacy and superfluous article, and this will lead you to abstinence even against your will. Scarcity in all things teaches a man patience; but whenever we enjoy possessions, we are unable to control ourselves.’ My cell may serve as a private pantry where I keep food for a periodic snack. Poverty can be compromised if I give in to the temptation to decorate my cell excessively or with

costly objects of art. Simplicity begins to be lost when my cell gets over furnished and cluttered with souvenirs, posters, mobiles, and miscellaneous odds and ends that might, or might not, come in handy someday. It could be beneficial to spring-clean one's cell, discarding items of clothing and other things that have not been used for a year and that someone else might be able to use. The cell may be misused as a refuge to which I can withdraw from the common life and barricade myself from others, from duties, from superiors, from the demands of community life. When others are looking for me, I can never be found. I turn my cell into a hideaway where I can pursue my own interests undisturbed. I have forgotten that a monk not a king in a palace but one of the poor of Christ who no longer belongs totally to himself but to God, to the Church, to the community.

Monk's cell is his holy place, but his Holy of Holies is his heart, which that is his true inner cell. The cell of the monk is where he hears his Beloved saying go into the deep where he attains all the monastic virtues, it's the furnace where he sees His Beloved in the middle of struggles, it's the meeting place with his Beloved, it's the battlefield, its where we entreat our Lord to enter it to as he entered the temple to cleanse it. Blessed is the monk who kisses the walls of his cell because of the sweet smell wafting from them; who, fallen prostrate on his face, inhales it and, bowed down on his knees, draws it out; who stands on his feet and burns in the heat; who embraces and kisses the cross and glows in the beauty of the Most High. whose heart leaps for joy and cries out in rejoicing! Sanctify your bed by the descent of the Spirit over you and the fragrance of your members will be wafted like perfume from the place of your reclining by the overshadowing! of the Most Holy One. Let the heart of those who seek the Lord rejoice! The arms are wearied by the embrace of the Beloved. The pupils of the eyes have been consumed by tears burning with desire. The ears have ceased listening to all sounds, in amazement at the beauty of the Beautiful One. The body is now kindled with fire and with the Spirit. who is able to speak of this? Blessed are you, O monk. And who may discuss it? It is not possible. Whoever understands this will take refuge in silence. For the One who from within goes towards our inner rooms, our imprudent tongue makes Him run out the door. Close your doors, Jerusalem, so that your Spouse might remain within you! Keep your windows closed to prolong the fragrance of his ointments! When your doors are opened and you look here and there, seeking Him in vain, you will wet your cheeks with your tears but not find Him, or if you do find Him it will be with difficulty, not freely with love. Then guard the doors with caution lest what occurred before happens to you again, because if you do not do this, you will deliver Him into the hands of the insolent and my own joy too will be changed into mourning. My friend, embrace what is yours and make supplication that what is mine may be also like yours. Blessed is the one whose altar is within him, and the Holy of Holies is inside of him! There, he will hear the voice of God which with one movement shakes and terrifies all of the rebels. There he will see the thick darkness of that many-splendored light. This is the holy place wherein the Most Holy One sometimes becomes visible by the brightness of his flashes of lightning

and sometimes conceals his appearance in the thick darkness of his glory in a vision' that is exalted above sight and knowledge. When your heart has grown warm, look intently there. When your limbs become loosened in fervor, fall there on your face. And let it be your delight to cry out simply, Father! Father! rather than to multiply the tears of infants born of the Spirit. This is the freedom of the perfect, those tears being alloyed involuntarily. And when psalmody is sweet for you, you are speechless and astonished when you look intently at your Sun who is shining unhindered in you and within your walls. This is the service which is preferred by the One who has come to serve to the remain hidden with the One.