



## **Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States**

### **Monthly Message for the Monastic**

### **November 2022**

### **Life of Meditation**

Abba Sisoës, is asked by a disciple for a word, he replies: “What shall I say to you? I read the New Testament, and I turn to the Old.” Reading the Scriptures both provided an antidote to evil tendencies and nourished the spirit. Epiphanius, a monk who eventually became bishop of Cyprus, lavished praise on the Scriptures as a defense against sin. “The acquisition of Christian books is necessary for those who can use them. For the mere sight of these books renders us less inclined to sin, and incites us to believe more firmly in righteousness.” In another place he observes: “Reading the Scriptures is a great safeguard against sin.” There is one kind of reading that teaches you how to behave. There is another the fires the soul with the zeal for virtue. Be diligent in meditating on the holy Scriptures and the lives of the Saints, for constant reflection upon them fosters thoughts of fervor, makes prayer easy, and makes tribulations endurable.

Meditation is an old, traditional term closely linked to profound and heartfelt Bible reading. Such reading leaves an indelible impression upon one’s memory, emotions, and tongue. According to patristic tradition, meditation is the key to all graces. It makes him who practices it biblical in every thought, word, and feeling. He also becomes advanced in every gift and full of divine understanding. When he opens his mouth, the words of the Bible flow spontaneously from his lips without embellishments. Divine thoughts proceed from his mouth in amazing succession. They are like waves of light that submerge the hearer’s mind in the light of divine knowledge. They stir his heart and set aflame his emotions. From this, the word meditation became particularly associated with Bible reading. Its usage came to be confined to studying the word of God with an inner depth. In this way, the soul may be imbued with the word of God and the spirit stimulated by it. According to patristic tradition, the first degree of meditation begins with reading the words slowly, relishing them, and repeating them in an audible voice. Reading, to the fathers, always meant doing so in an audible voice and was called reiteration. The word of God is reiterated in an audible voice and relished in our inner consciousness. In this manner, it can find rest in our innermost recesses. Reiteration here is like rumination. After a while the words actually become one’s own words. Man, then, becomes a faithful storehouse for the word of God. His heart becomes a divine treasury for it. He brings “out of his treasure what is new and what is old” (Mt 13.52). This is what is originally meant by “keeping the gospel” or “keeping the word.” The gospel, or the word, is thus kept safely inside one’s heart as a precious treasure. According to the prophet David, “I have laid up thy word in my heart” (Ps 119.11). Man, then, withdraws himself into God’s word as if into a strong room inaccessible to thieves.

Such reading allows the Word of God to touch and awaken the heart. “Indeed,” says the Letter to the Hebrews, “the word of God is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword . . . able to discern reflections and thoughts of the heart” (Heb 4:12). When we spend time in reading and meditating, we invite God’s Word to penetrate our heart and to evoke from that deepest center of our being a response of surrender, wonder, praise, regret, petition, love. In the words that we read, God speaks to us; in our prayerful pauses we respond to God, verbally or wordlessly. Continual exposure to the power of the word of God in reading will have noticeable effects on the reader. Gradually, with divine grace, the word will become flesh in the reader’s daily life. He or she will become not merely a hearer, but a doer, of the word (Luke 6:47). Reading makes an opening through which the life-giving word of God can enter the reader’s heart and carry on its work of healing and transforming. The word, once received, is received more readily the next time. The habit of listening during reading fosters the attitude of listening in other situations to what the word of God is asking. The habit of contemplating over words and phrases or saying them aloud promotes the practice of repeating short, spontaneous prayers during free moments or while working. Faithfulness to such reading should produce a gradual change in the reader’s relationships with other people, helping him or her become more generous, considerate, gentle, and less selfish, irritable, gossipy.

This “secret,” that God speaks directly to each of us in His Word, changed many sinners into holy saints. St. Augustine recounts how a friend told him the story of St. Anthony’s conversion, a story that sparked in Augustine a deeper desire to follow Jesus radically. St. Anthony was an Egyptian born in the middle of the third century. He was from a wealthy family, and while still a young man he inherited a rather large fortune when his parents died. Wondering what to do with his life and his newfound wealth, he went to a church. Upon entering he heard the gospel reading, “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me” (Mt 19:21). Although these words of Jesus were addressed to the rich young man, Anthony received them as spoken to himself. He immediately sold everything he had and gave it to the poor, and devoted himself exclusively to Christ. He went out into the desert to live as a hermit and, paradoxically, founded a great movement in the Church (i.e., the Desert Fathers) when a flood of disciples persisted in coming to him for spiritual guidance. By his obedience to the Word of God, he became the father of the entire monastic tradition. The desolate desert became a spiritually fertile land, as Anthony continued to listen attentively each day to Scripture as God’s Word addressed to him: this was the lesson he taught to those who likewise left the noise of the world in order to better hear and live God’s Word. Spurred on by the example of St. Anthony, and by many others who had come to faith and God’s service as a result of Anthony’s life, Augustine began to weep at his own slowness of heart. At that moment, Augustine heard what sounded like the voice of a child singing a refrain over and over again “tolle lege, tolle lege,” which means “take and read, take and read.” Augustine recounts what happened next: I stemmed the flood of tears and rose to my feet, believing that this could be nothing other than a divine command to open the Book and read the first passage I chanced upon; for I had heard the story of how Anthony had been instructed by a gospel text. He happened to arrive while the gospel was being read, and took the words to be addressed to himself when he heard, “Go and sell all you possess and give the money to the poor: you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” So he promptly converted to You by this plainly divine message. Stung into action, I returned to the place where Alypius was sitting, for on leaving it I had put

down there the book of the Apostle's letters. I snatched it up, opened it and read in silence the passage on which my eyes first lighted. Augustine, like Anthony, read a passage from Scripture (Rom 13:11-14) and heard the summons to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ" as a word spoken directly to him by God. It was the turning point of his life and he fully responded. Augustine had heard Scripture many times before, but had not converted. His reading of Romans 13 was the first time he heard Scripture as a word personally addressed to him, and it transformed his life. "You can't hear God speak to someone else, you can hear him only if you are being addressed." This is the secret of the saints; to discover that you are, in fact, being addressed by God in Scripture. Many saints like St. John of Dalyatha tasted the fruits of such reading and meditating on the word of God as spoken directly to them turning them into their own personal prayer "Hold him in your arms like Mary his mother. Enter with the Magi and offer your gifts. Proclaim his birth with the shepherds. Proclaim his praise with the angels. Carry him in your arms like Simeon the Elder. Take him with Joseph down to Egypt. When he goes to play with little children steal up to him and kiss him. Inhale the sweet savor of his body, the body that gives life to everybody. Follow the early years of his childhood in all its stages, for this infuses his love into your soul. Cleave to him: your mortal body will be scented with the spice of the life in his immortal body. Sit with him in the temple and listen to the words coming from his mouth while the astonished teachers listen. When he asks, when he answers, listen and marvel at his wisdom. Stand there at the Jordan and greet him with John. Wonder at his humility when you see him bow his head to John to be baptized. Go out with him to the desert and ascend the mount. Sit there at his feet in silence with the wild beasts that sought the company of their Lord. Stand up there with him to learn how to fight the good fight against your enemies. Stand at the well with the Samaritan woman to learn worship in spirit and truth. Roll the stone from the tomb of Lazarus to know the resurrection from the dead. Stand with the multitude, take your share of the five loaves and know the blessings of prayer. Go, wake him up who is asleep at the stern of your boat when the waves beat into it. Weep with Mary, wash his feet with your tears to hear his words of comfort. Lay your head on his breast with John, hear his heart throbbing with love to the world. Take for yourself a morsel of the bread he blessed during supper to be one with his body and confirmed in him forever. Rise, do not keep your feet away that he may wash them from the impurity of sin. Go out with him to the Mount of Olives. Learn from him how to bend your knees and pray until the sweat pours down. Rise, meet your cursers and crucifiers, surrender your hands to the bonds, do not keep your face away from the slapping and spitting. Strip your back to be lashed. Rise, my friend, do not fall to the ground, bear your cross, for it is time for departure. Stretch your arms with him and do not keep your feet from the nails. Taste with him the bitterness of gall. Rise early while it is still dark. Go to his tomb to see the glorious resurrection. Sit in the upper room and wait for his coming while the doors are closed. Open your ears to hear the words of peace from his mouth. Make haste and go to a lonely place. Bow your head to receive the last blessing before he ascends.

Reading is the careful study of the Scriptures, concentrating all one's powers on it. Meditation is the busy application of the mind to seek with the help of one's own reason for knowledge of hidden truth. Prayer is the heart's devoted turning to God to drive away evil and obtain what is good. Contemplation is when the mind is in some sort lifted up to God and held above itself, so that it tastes the joys of everlasting sweetness. Reading seeks for the sweetness of a blessed life, meditation perceives it, prayer asks for it, contemplation

tastes it. Reading, as it were, puts food whole into the mouth, meditation chews it and breaks it up, prayer extracts its flavor, contemplation is the sweetness itself which gladdens and refreshes. Reading works on the outside, meditation on the heart: prayer asks for what we long for, contemplation gives us delight in the sweetness which we have found. May God grants us to taste the sweetness of His word and to always meditate on it and sing with David saying “I have laid up thy word in my heart, that I might not sin against thee”