



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

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On Silence

“Silence is the mystery of the age to come, but words are instruments of this world” teaches St. Isaac the Syrian. When the fathers asked Abba Arsenius why do you flee from us, the elder replied “God knows that I love all of you, but I cannot be speaking with you and God at the same time” so the fathers teach us the main goal of silence is not just the absent of sound, but we keep silence in order to have an internal conversation with God.

Love silence above all things, because it brings you near to fruit that the tongue cannot express. First let us force ourselves to be silent, and then from out of this silence something is born that leads us into silence itself. May God grant you to perceive some part of that which is born of silence! If you begin with this discipline, I know not how much light will dawn on you from it. Do not infer, O brother, from what is said of that wondrous man Arsenius, that when the fathers would visit him, and the brethren would come to see him, and he would sit with them and remain silent, and in silence let them go do not infer, I say, that he did this completely voluntarily, except at the beginning when he used to force himself to it. After a time, a certain sweetness is born in the heart from the practice of this labor, and it leads the body by force to persevere in stillness. A multitude of tears is born to us in this discipline through a wonderful divine vision of something that the heart distinctly perceives, sometimes with pain, sometimes with amazement. For the heart humbles itself and becomes like a tiny child, and as soon as she begins to pray, tears flow forth in advance of her prayer.

When you put all the works of this discipline on one side and silence on the other, you will find the latter to be greater in weight. The admonitions of the Fathers are many. When a man draws near to silence, the keeping of these is superfluous for him, and works themselves become superfluous; he is found to have gone beyond them, for he has approached perfection. Silence is also an aid to stillness.

St. John Climacus warns us about talkativeness, Talkativeness is the throne of vainglory on which it loves to preen itself and show off. Talkativeness

is a sign of ignorance, a doorway to slander, a leader of jesting, a servant of lies, the ruin of compunction, a summoner of despondency, a messenger of sleep, a dissipation of recollection, the end of vigilance, the cooling of zeal, the darkening of prayer. Intelligent silence is the mother of prayer, freedom from bondage, custodian of zeal, a guard on our thoughts, a watch on our enemies, a prison of mourning, a friend of tears, a sure recollection of death, a painter of punishment, a concern with judgment, servant of anguish, a companion of stillness, a growth of knowledge, a hand to shape contemplation, hidden progress, the secret journey upward.

For the man who recognizes his sins has taken control of his tongue, while the chatterer has yet to discover himself as he should. The lover of silence draws close to God. He talks to Him in secret and God enlightens him. Jesus, by His silence, shamed Pilate; and a man, by his stillness, conquers vainglory. Peter wept bitterly for what he had said. He had forgotten the one who declared: "I said: I will guard my ways so that I may not sin with my tongue" (Ps. 38:1). He had forgotten too the saying, "Better to fall from a height to the ground than to slip with the tongue" (Sirach. 20:20).

The language of the heart is silence—not a bleak, empty silence, but a profound and meaningful silence that ceaselessly sings the glory of God. Silence gives birth to stillness, and therefore, my brethren, let stillness be reckoned by you as greater than any other way of life. For by continual abiding in stillness the wandering thoughts are mortified along with empty recollections and deadly passions, since continual abiding within itself makes the intellect stronger than anything else. Thus, it mightily defeats the thoughts, it destroys the memory of wrath, and it slays the passions through patience, whereas these very things are the ruin of the intellect and the death of the true man. There is nothing that destroys them like the weapon of stillness conjoined with the building up of instruction in the knowledge of the truth. For it is by knowledge that passions, sins, and vain thoughts (both those of the body and those of the soul) are separated from the soul.

Elijah found that the Lord was not in the whirlwind, nor in the earthquake, nor in the fire, but in the still small voice. It was in silence that God spoke to him. Isaiah learned that "in quietness and confidence" lay the sources of his strength. The saints and mystics of every age unite in testifying that silence is an indispensable condition of spiritual knowledge, that without it we cannot call our souls our own, that "a man does not see himself in running water but in still water," those spiritual realities do not shriek or shout but that God is waiting in the depths of our being to talk to us if we will only "wash our souls with silence." "Silence," writes St. John of the Ladder, "is the mother of prayer. a continuous ascension to heaven. "A silent mouth interprets God's mysteries, so let us love silence for in it we will have life in our souls.