



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

June 2023 On Calmness

One day, while an elder was walking in the desert, he saw a reed that was moving with the wind. He approached the reed and asked it, "Why are you moving, even though there is no wind?" The reed replied, "It is because I am afraid of the wind, and I want to move before it moves me." The elder smiled and said, "You are like many people in this world. They are always afraid of what might happen to them, and they are constantly moving and changing their direction to avoid danger. But the truly wise person is like a tree that is firmly rooted in the ground. When the wind blows, it cannot uproot it." The reed understood the monk's words and became still, no longer moved by fear or anxiety. The elder used this encounter to teach others about the importance of inner stillness and trust in God. He said, "The soul that is anchored in God remains unmoved by the winds of temptation and turmoil. It is only when we let go of our trust in God that we become like the reed, swayed by every passing fear and worry." This story reminds us of the importance of cultivating inner stillness and trust in God, even in the midst of life's challenges and uncertainties. By staying rooted in our faith and anchored in God's love, we can find peace and calmness in the midst of life's storms.

The Elements of Calmness has to involve the human being's whole life: inwardly and outwardly; what is apparent and what is hidden. Thus, it must include:

1. Inner calmness: which is made up of tranquility of the mind, serenity of the heart and calmness of the thoughts.
2. Calmness of the body: which consists of the stillness of the senses and calmness of movement.
3. Calmness of the nerves: which consists of the serenity of the features and the spirit of cheerfulness.
4. Calmness of speech: which also includes calmness of the voice.

5. Calmness of behavior: which consists of a serenity in practical matters of life and in private behavior, and a calm approach to solving any problem which the individual might meet.

One cannot judge whether a person is calm until his calmness has been tested. A person may appear calm, because the external conditions around him are calm: no problem or provocation has yet occurred to test his calmness. However, if you clash with him, he will probably show his real self and whether he is calm or not. It is only when one person clashes with another over a matter of opinion or behavior, or when insult or injury befalls him or he is faced with hurtful words that, according to how he behaves, he can be judged as to his calmness. It is the same situation if he falls into a problem, adversity, illness, or some difficulty. All of these could be a test of his disposition and nerves. How does he behave and react? Does he lose his calmness or endure to solve the problem calmly? This is the first test of true calmness. Any person can be calm when circumstances are calm. True calmness is not external, but internal. This calmness does not only show on the outside while a volcano rages within. On the contrary, a person's internal peace is the source and origin of his outer calmness.

Acquired calmness, requires effort and practice, Abba Moses the Strong is a good example of someone who acquired calmness through training. He was not born like that, but in fact started life as a cruel murderer. Later, when he entered the monastic life, he began to discipline himself in calmness until he mastered it so well that, when he was called for his ordination as a priest and Pope Theophilus ordered him to be sent away insultingly in order to test him, Abba Moses left quietly, blaming himself without feeling upset inside. When they called him to return, he went back quietly without hurting his dignity. In light of this, it is not strange that one of the saints saw him in a vision being fed honeycomb by the angels. If you are not calm by nature, do not make excuses saying, "What can I do? I was just born that way!" Even if you were born that way or inherited a lack of calmness from your parents or others, it is no excuse. You can change what you inherited. Someone who has not obtained natural calmness can acquire calmness by training himself and striving hard to gain it. The qualities with which a person is born are not like a fixed rule that cannot be changed. They are quite easily changed if the good intention exists accompanied by a sincere determination, hard work, and effort. Then the Lord will give you a new heart, removing from you the heart of stone, and giving you a heart of flesh as He promised. "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh" (Eze 36:26).

Abba Ammonas (a disciple of St. Anthony) wrote: The soul cannot know God unless it withdraws itself from men and from every distraction. For then the soul will see the adversary who fights against it. And once it has seen the adversary and has overcome him every time he engages it in battle, then God dwells in the soul, and all the labor is changed to joy and gladness..... This is why the holy fathers also withdrew into the desert alone, men such as Elijah the Tishbite and St. John the Baptist. For do not suppose that because the righteous were in the midst of men it was among men that they had achieved their righteousness. Rather, having first practiced much quiet, they then received the power of God dwelling in them, Many monks at the present time have been unable to persevere in quiet because they could not overcome their self-will. Elijah on Mount Carmel dedicated himself to philosophy [St. Gregory here and elsewhere speaks of monastic solitude as "philosophy" with joy, and St. John [the Baptist] did so in the desert. Our Lord Jesus himself did many activities among people, but in order to dedicate himself to prayer went to silent and desert places. For which reason? I think, in order to furnish us with a law according to which, for a pure association with God, one must remain in tranquility and calmness and at least to a small degree raise one's intellect from deceitful things.. Avoid tarrying in a city, and persevere dwelling in the wilderness. "Lo, says holy David, "I have fled afar off and have dwelt in the wilderness" (Ps. 54:7). If possible, do not go to a city at all. For you will see nothing of benefit, nothing useful, nothing profitable for your way of life. Therefore, seek places that are free from distractions.

St. Isaac the Syrian wrote: If flight [from men] and watchfulness is profitable for St. Anthony and St. Arsenius, how much more is it for the infirm? And if God esteemed the stillness of these men-whose words, presence, and help the whole world was in need of -higher than succor given to all the brethren, nay rather, to all mankind, how much more will this be the case with the man who is unable perfectly to guard himself?

St. Basil the Great wrote: We must strive after a quiet mind.... The wilderness is of the greatest use for this purpose, inasmuch as it stills our passions and gives reason for freedom to cut them out of the soul. Let there then be such a place as ours, that the continuity of our asceticism be not interrupted from without.... Quiet, then, as I have said, is the first step in our sanctification; the tongue purified from the gossip of the world; the eyes unexcited by fair color or comely shape; the ear not relaxing the tone or mind by worldly songs, nor by that especial mischief, the talk of light men and jesters. Thus the mind, saved from dissipation from without, and not through the senses thrown upon the world, falls back upon itself, and thereby ascends to the contemplation of God. "The benefit of stillness is greater than money,

glory, and worldly pleasures, according to St. Gregory the Theologian: 'Quiet and freedom from affairs is more precious than the splendor of a busy life! And according to the wise St. Nilos: 'The life of stillness is more splendid than a large fortune, for according to St. Basil the Great: 'Stillness is the first step in our soul's purification' St. Isidore also says: 'Departure into solitude has given me a fair amount of knowledge. For he who lives amidst turbulence and wants heavenly knowledge has forgotten that "whatever is sown in thorns is choked by them, and he who lacks stillness cannot know God."

Sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything." These are the words of Abba Moses, one of the great Desert Fathers who lived in the fourth century. What does it mean to sit in your cell? It means to cultivate a life of inner stillness and quietness, where the noise and distractions of the world are left behind, and the heart can be fully open to God.

In this state of calmness, we are able to listen to the voice of God and to discern His will for our lives. We become like a vessel that is empty and open, ready to receive whatever God wants to pour into us. And as we learn to abide in this state of quietness, we discover a deep sense of peace and contentment that is not dependent on external circumstances.

The Desert Fathers knew the value of cultivating this inner stillness. They understood that the external world is often full of noise and distractions that can pull us away from our true purpose. They taught that by turning inward, we can discover the eternal source of calmness and quietness that lies at the very center of our being. So let us take the words of Abba Moses to heart and seek to cultivate a life of inner stillness and quietness. Let us learn to sit in our own "cell" – whether it be a physical space of solitude or an inner state of consciousness – and allow ourselves to be taught by the wisdom that flows from the heart of God. In this way, we can experience the true joy and peace that comes from a life that is fully centered on Him. As we strive to deepen our relationship with God, it is essential that we cultivate a spirit of calmness and stillness within ourselves.

In the Book of Psalms, we read: "Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10). This verse reminds us that in order to truly know God, we must first learn to be still and quiet in His presence. We must let go of the distractions of the world and enter into a state of peace and tranquility. This is not always an easy task. Our lives are filled with noise and busyness, and it can be challenging to find moments of quiet in the midst of our daily routines. But we must make the effort to do so, for it is in the stillness that we can truly hear God's voice.

"Be still and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10). How sweet are these words! They bring peace to the heart of the one who hears them. Stillness is the mother of prayer, the nurse of holy thoughts. It is the root of the spirit, the foundation of faith. Without stillness, prayer is fruitless and thoughts are wandering. Stillness is not only the absence of noise, but it is also the tranquility of the soul. The one who has attained stillness is free from the tumult of the world, the noise of the passions, and the storm of sinful thoughts. In this calm and quiet state, the soul can hear the voice of God speaking in the depths of the heart. The one who desires to attain stillness must first detach himself from the world, withdraw from the noise of the world, and turn his attention inward to the quiet of the heart. He must cleanse himself of all the distractions that cloud his mind and heart, and turn his focus towards the inner chamber of his soul. In this inner chamber, the one who seeks stillness must be vigilant, watching over his thoughts and guarding his heart against the attacks of the enemy. He must resist the urge to become distracted by worldly cares and concerns, and remain steadfast in his quest for inner peace and calmness.

May God grant us the grace to attain this calmness and stillness, so that we may hear His voice and know the peace that surpasses all understanding."