



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

July 2023
Obediences¹

It was told about Abba Ammoes and Abba Bitimios once visited Abba Achillas. It was very early, and they found him working, weaving rope. They asked him to direct a few beneficial words to them, and he replied: "Since yesterday evening up to this time, I have been weaving rope at full pace, though, in fact, I do not need to do so much work. However, I am working thus, lest God find it necessary to chastise me, saying, 'Why, despite the fact that you are able, do you not work?' Therefore, I labor with all of my strength."

Countless monastic fathers of the Church emphasized the value of manual labor because it leads to humility, [The Apostle Paul] said of himself that he labored with his own hands in hunger and thirst, in cold and nakedness, by day and by night so that neither he nor those with him might lack anything necessary. We exhort you not to love idleness. Rather each of you should work together and, as you are able, with sincerity and single-heartedness.... The monk who does not keep his body busy can never keep his mind free from sordid thoughts, as Solomon says: "The lazy are beset by their passions" (cf. Prov. 13:4), and "idleness contrives many wicked things" (Sir. 33:29). Let those who have been lazy up to now shed this vice, and let them promptly take up every work, for it is written: "Do not hate hard which was created by the Most High" (Sir. 7:15). St. John Cassian also understood how work safeguards monks from temptations. He wrote: "There is a saying among the ancient Fathers of Egypt that a monk who is working is tempted by one demon, while an idle one is attacked by a numberless multitude of demons."

Do not be negligent in your handiwork; for often your mind will give birth to the thought that you will supposedly not be able to learn some craft. "You are," it will tell you, "Weak and lazy, and you are unable to withstand the pain that it takes to carry out this work. Look, every part of your body aches from fatigue, because you are not used to being exhausted. So, get up

¹ The word Obedience in the monastery means "Work".

and go back to where you were. And there," your mind tells you, "if you but fear God, you will be saved. "Now, do not be conquered by such thoughts, but be patient with the Lord, Who called you to His Kingdom. For He has told us," "In patience possess ye your souls" (St. Luke 21:19), and, "If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you" (St. Matthew 17:20). So, my beloved, let us be patient, for we place our hope not in man, but in God, Who saves all those who hope on Him.

Perhaps, beloved, one has no need to endure struggles in order to learn to read and write? If you learn a worldly trade, will you not likewise have to endure toil? If, then, you endure for these things with longsuffering, is it not fitting that you should have to withstand all things The sake of the Lord? For even the Scripture says: "Thou shalt eat the fruit of thy labors; blessed art thou, and it shall be well with thee" (Psalm 127:2). And the Apostle exhorts us: "Let him labor, working with his hands the thing which is good," so that not just the laborer will have to eat, but "that he may have to give him that needeth" (Ephesians 4:28). Thus, he who hates work is not upright, for idleness manifests much evil, while he who loves works tastes of no sorrow.

Beloved, if you should choose piety for yourself, take care, lest, under the guise of piety, the Evil One should put in your mind an alien thought; that is, the vain or prideful thought that you need not labor along with your brothers, so as supposedly not to endanger your piety. On the contrary, work, like your brothers, and take care for your piety. For idleness destroys piety, and to those who embrace it, it gives a shameful name. Therefore, combine piety and your interest in work, and you will then be truly pious. Beloved, if you are toiling in the monastery and you become more fatigued than the others, be careful, so that the Evil One does not secretly bring about thoughts in you that are filled with deadly bitterness, such that you say to yourself, "I am carrying out too much work," and thus ask for more, or different, work than the other brothers. For if you think about such things, you are not walking in accord with love. Whenever you ask your reward from men, you lose that of God. Now, since you await your recompense from Him, do not desire those things which are offered to you by men. It is better to humble yourself before your brothers and be joyful, anticipating rewards that will be given by the Just Judge, Who will give to each his reward according to his works and Who said in this respect: "Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his lord has made ruler over his household, to give them food in due season? Blessed is that servant, whom his lord when he cometh shall find so doing. truly I say unto you, that he shall make him ruler over all his goods" (St. Matthew 24:45-47). I also know a brother who said: "I will pray to God to give His blessing

to my handiwork, so that the monastery might be supported by it; for this would give me great joy, and I would thank God all the more, Who said: "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these My brethren, ye have done it unto Me' (St. Matthew: 25:40). Blessed is the monk who keeps the commandments of the Lord and continually attends to the following three: devotion in prayer, work, and study.

Beloved, if you are living in a coenobitic monastery with brothers, be of humble mind, serving your brothers in all things. Therefore, when the Superiors order that you submit to some work together with the brothers, eagerly run and do not wait for another to get there before you. Neither have dealings with those who are lazy, who damage themselves by their laziness and who are thus greatly injured. First of all, they become disobedient, selfishness, and sluggishness; besides this, they lose any reward for their labors; and thirdly, and more importantly, they give reason to others for complaining, backbiting, and disobedience. They will render an account to God, Who will judge them for the spiritual damage done to others. You, then, brother, must pay them no heed; for no one ever says at harvest time: "Since my neighbor is not reaping wheat for himself, neither will I reap wheat for myself." But on the contrary, every person, whenever he has the time, gathers food for himself, so as not to be in need when winter comes. Because idleness betokens great evil and is the playground of the devil.

In the world, work is often seen as a means to an end, a way to earn a living or fulfill our material needs. However, in the monastic life, work takes on a deeper meaning. It becomes a path towards communion with God, a means to cultivate virtues, and an expression of our love for Him and for one another. The desert fathers found solace in their work. They labored diligently, whether it was manual tasks like weaving baskets or tending to the garden, or engaging in intellectual pursuits like studying Scripture and engaging in prayer.

Through their work, the desert fathers discovered the transformative power of labor. It became a channel for inner purification, a way to silence the distractions of the world and focus their minds and hearts on God. Their hands became instruments of prayer, their actions infused with divine purpose.

As monastics, we are called to offer our labor as an offering to God, free from self-centeredness and ego. It is through humility and self-denial that our work becomes sanctified. In the monastic life, work is not seen as a burden, but rather as a blessing. Saint John Cassian, a great spiritual teacher of the desert, beautifully expresses the harmony between work and prayer. Therefore, let us embrace our work with a spirit of joy and gratitude, knowing

that through it, we draw closer to God. Let us offer each task, no matter how small or mundane, as an act of worship. Let us approach our work with humility, acknowledging that we are unworthy servants, yet entrusted with the privilege of serving our Lord. As we strive for holiness in our monastic life, may our work be a testament to the love of Christ within us. Let it be a light that shines in the darkness, a witness to the transformative power of God's grace. And may we, like the desert fathers before us, find true fulfillment and communion with God through the labor of our hands, the toil of our bodies, and the dedication of our hearts.