



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

October 2023 The Hidden Man of the Heart

An elder once said “God has fashioned every heart in a special way, and each heart is His goal, a place wherein He desires to abide that He may manifest Himself.”

Since the kingdom of God is within us (f. Luke 17:21), the heart is the battlefield of our salvation, and all ascetic effort is aimed at cleansing it of all filthiness, and preserving it pure before the Lord. 'Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life', exhorts Solomon, the wise king of Israel (Prov. 4:23). These paths of life pass through man's heart, and therefore the unquenchable desire of all who ceaselessly seek the Face of the living God is that their heart, once deadened by sin, may be rekindled by His grace. The heart is the true 'temple of man's meeting with the Lord. Man's heart 'seeks knowledge (Prov. 15:14), both intellectual and divine, and knows no rest until the Lord of glory comes and abides therein. On His part God, who is 'a jealous God' (Exod. 34:14), will not settle for a mere portion of the heart. In the Old Testament we hear His voice crying out, My son, give Me thy heart (prov 23:26); and in the New Testament He commands: Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength' (Matt. 12:30).

He is the one Who has fashioned the heart of every man in a unique and unrepeatable way, though no heart can contain Him fully because 'God is greater than our heart' (I John 3:20). Nevertheless, when man succeeds in turning his whole heart to God, then God Himself begets it by the incorruptible seed of His word, seals it with His wondrous Name, and makes it shine with His perpetual and charismatic presence. He makes it a temple of His Divinity, a temple not made by hands, able to reflect His shape and to hearken unto His voice and 'bear' His Name (John 5:37; Acts 9:15). In a word, man then fulfils the purpose of his life, the reason for his coming into the transient existence of this world.

The great tragedy of our time lies in the fact that we live, speak, think, and even pray to God, outside our heart, outside our Father's house. And truly our Father's house is our heart, the place where 'the spirit of glory and of God' (1 Pet. 4:14) would find repose, that Christ may be formed in us (Gal. 4:19). Indeed, only then can we be made whole, Ineffable sacrifice. Yet, as long as we are held captive by our passions, which distract our mind from our heart and lure it into the ever changing and vain world of natural and created things, thus depriving us of all spiritual strength. The return journey from this remote and inhospitable land is not an easy one, and there is no hunger more fearful than that of a heart laid waste by sin. Those in whom the heart is full of the consolation of incorruptible grace

can endure all external deprivations and afflictions, transforming them into a feast of spiritual joy; but the famine in a hardened heart lacking divine consolation is a comfortless torment. There is no greater misfortune than that of an insensible and petrified heart that is unable to distinguish between the luminous Way of God's Providence and the gloomy confusion of the ways of this world.

On the other hand, throughout history there have been men whose hearts were filled with grace. These chosen vessels were enlightened by the spirit of prophecy, and were therefore able to distinguish between Divine Light and the darkness of this world. No matter how daunting and difficult the struggle of purifying the heart may be, nothing should deter us from this undertaking. We have on our side the ineffable goodness of a God Who has made man's heart His personal concern and goal. In the Book of Job, we read the following astonishing words: What is man, that thou shouldest magnify him? And that thou shouldest set thine heart upon him? And that thou shouldest visit him every morning, and try him every moment. ...Why hast thou set me as a mark against thee, so that I am a burden to myself? Job 7:17-18, 20).

We sense God, who is incomprehensible, pursuing man's heart: "Behold, I stand at the door, and knock if any man hears my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me' (Rev: 3:20). He knocks at the door of our heart, but He also encourages us to knock at the door of His mercy: Knock, and it shall Be opened unto you' (Luke 11:9-10).

The kingdom of God is within you, says the Lord. Turn, then, to God with all your heart. Forsake this wretched world and your soul shall find rest. Learn to despise external things, to devote yourself to those that are within, and you will see the kingdom of God come unto you, that kingdom which is peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, gifts not given to the impious. Christ will come to you offering His consolation, if you prepare a fit dwelling for Him in your heart, whose beauty and glory, wherein He takes delight, are all from within. His visits with the inward man are frequent, His communion sweet and full of consolation, His peace great, and His tenderness wonderful indeed. Therefore, faithful soul, prepare your heart for this Bridegroom that He may come and dwell within you; He Himself says: "If any one love Me, he will keep My word, and My Father will love him, and We will come to him, and will make Our abode with him Give place, then, to Christ, but deny entrance to all others, for when you have Christ you are rich and He is sufficient for you.