



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

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The Monastic Struggle

Abba Zacharias stated: “He is a monk who forces himself in everything.” St. John of Sinai explained: “A monk is one who holds only to the commands of God in every time and place and matter. A monk is one who constantly constrains his nature and unceasingly watches over his senses. A monk is he who keeps his body in chastity, his mouth pure and his mind illumined. A monk is a mourning soul that both asleep and awake is unceasingly occupied with the remembrance of death.” Likewise, St. Efthymios the Great taught: “Brethren, strive for what brought you out here, and do not neglect your own salvation. You must at all times stay sober and awake. As Scripture says, ‘Keep awake, and pray not to enter into temptation.’”

What is a monk? A monk is a fulfiller of the commandments of Christ, a perfect Christian, an imitator of and a participant in the passion of Christ, a daily martyr, a voluntary dead man who willingly dies in spiritual struggles. A monk is a pillar of patience, a depth of humility, a fount of tears, a treasury of purity, one who laughs at all that is considered splendid, sweet, glorious, and attractive in this world. A monk is a soul that is pained, constantly meditating on the memory of death, both in wakefulness and in sleep. A monk is one who constantly forces nature, and who guards his feelings without weakening. A monk is of the order and condition of the fleshless ones, though preserved in a material body, having in mind at all times, in every place, and in every work, only what is divine.

According to the words of Scripture, now that you have set out “to serve the Lord, remain in the fear of God and prepare your soul” not for peace or security or pleasure but “for trials and difficulties” (Sir. 2:1). For “we must enter the kingdom of God through many tribulations” (Acts 14:21), inasmuch as “the gate is narrow and the path is strait which leads to life, and few there are who find it” (Mt. 7:14). Consider, then, that you are one of the chosen few, and do not grow cold through the example and the lukewarmness of the multitude, but live as do the few, so that with the few you may deserve to be

found in the kingdom. “For many are called, but few are chosen” (Mt. 20:16). And “small is the flock” (Lk. 12:32) to whom the Father is pleased to give the inheritance. Similarly, an elder once said in a homily to monks: “In this place, dearly beloved, we have gathered not to enjoy quiet, not to be secure, but rather to fight and to engage in combat. It is to struggle that we have advanced here.” The monk shall live in a monastery under the rule of one father and in the company of many brethren, in order that he may learn humility from one, patience from another. One will teach him silence, another meekness. He shall not do what pleases him; he shall eat what is set before him, clothe himself with what is given him, do the work assigned to him. He shall go to bed so tired that he may fall asleep while going, and rise before he has had sufficient rest. If he suffers wrong, he shall be silent; nor shall he criticize the words of the elders because it is his duty to obey and to do what he is bidden, as Moses says: “Attend, and hear, O Israel” (Deut. 6:4).

St. Basil the great said, the kingdom of heaven belongs to the violent and “the violent take it by force”—these are the words of the Gospel (vid. Mt. 11:12). By “violence” is meant the affliction of the body which the disciples of Christ voluntarily undergo by denying their own will, refusing respite to the body, and observing the commandments of Christ. If, then, you wish to seize the kingdom of God, become a man of violence; bow your neck to the yoke of Christ’s service, By labor in acquiring virtues, in fasting, in vigils, in obedience, in stillness, in psalmody, in prayer, in tears, in manual labor, in bearing all the tribulations which befall you at the hands of men and demons.

In the hallowed tradition of Orthodox monasticism, we find a profound and enduring struggle—a spiritual battle waged within the heart of every monk and nun. This battle is not fought with swords or shields, but with prayer, fasting, and unwavering devotion. Let us delve into the essence of this Orthodox monastic struggle.

The Battle Against the Passions: At the core of the monastic struggle lies the battle against the passions—those inner drives and desires that separate us from God. The Desert Fathers and Mothers, those early monastic pioneers, recognized that the passions could be like unruly beasts within us. They taught that through vigilance, asceticism, and ceaseless prayer, these passions could be tamed, transforming the soul into a vessel for God's grace.

The Quest for Humility: Humility is a cornerstone of Orthodox monasticism. The Desert Fathers saw pride as the root of all sin, and they sought to cultivate profound humility. Through acts of self-denial and self-

emptying, they aimed to strip away the ego's armor and make room for God's presence.

The Silence of the Heart: In the stillness of the desert or the solitude of the monastery, Orthodox monks and nuns find a sacred silence. This silence is not merely the absence of noise but a profound interior quietude. It is in this silence that they encounter God's voice, not in thunderous words but in the gentle whisper of the heart.

Communion Through Prayer: Prayer is the lifeblood of monastic existence. It is a ceaseless conversation with the Divine, a lifeline to the transcendent. Monastics engage in the Jesus Prayer, the Psalms, and the Divine Liturgy, drawing closer to God with every utterance.

Embracing the Cross: The Cross is not just a symbol in Orthodoxy; it's a way of life. Monastics are called to take up their cross daily, embracing suffering and trials as a means to unite themselves with the crucified Christ. It is through these struggles that they draw nearer to the Resurrection.

The Pursuit of Love: Above all, the monastic struggle is about love—love for God and love for one's neighbor. Through their rigorous asceticism and their dedication to prayer, monastics prepare their hearts to become vessels of divine love, shining beacons of God's grace in a world often shrouded in darkness.

As we reflect on the Orthodox monastic struggle, we find a profound lesson—a lesson in unwavering commitment, in the relentless pursuit of God, and in the transformative power of a life dedicated to prayer, humility, and love because the labor of every struggle pass, but the victory remains.