



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

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On Blessed Humility

“There is a difference between being humble, *striving for humility*, and praising the humble. The first is a mark of the perfect, *the second of the obedient*, and the third of all the faithful.”¹

St John Climacus - The Ladder of Divine Ascent - Step 25

My brethren, let us examine the words of the Desert Fathers, and especially those of St. John of the Ladder, and understand what is meant by ‘striving for humility’ and its relationship to obedience. Much earlier in his great work, St John states in Step 4 that, “Obedience is the burial place of the will and the resurrection of humility,”² and in so saying, he directly connects these virtues. But if someone is struggling to be obedient, how then can one practically strive for humility at the same time? Let us see what Abba Dorotheos of Gaza tells us about this in the opening line of his discourse on humility:

“One of the fathers used to say, “Prior to all other things we require humility, *being prepared to listen to whatever word is spoken to us and to say in response, “I submit,”* for by humility every means of the foe, every type of hindrance, is destroyed.”... The saint wanted to show us that neither the fear of God, nor faith, nor self-control, or any of the other virtues can correct us if we lack humility.”³

In this passage, Abba Dorotheos is telling us that one must humble himself in order to become humble, through submission, i.e., obedience. But how is it possible that one can be humble if he has not yet acquired this virtue? His Holiness Pope Shenouda III, of the thrice blessed memory, answers this question in his book ‘Characteristics of the Spiritual Path’ in his chapter on ‘self-

¹ John Climacus, John Climacus: The Ladder of Divine Ascent, ed. Richard J. Payne, trans. Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell, The Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982), 222.

² *ibid*, 92.

³ Discourses of Dorotheos of Gaza - On Humility

coercion'. He tells us that, "Self-coercion means that a person forces himself to walk in the spiritual path" and, "... through self-coercion, he does not leave his inner self to its passions, but he commands and it obeys, he directs it and it submits, even by compelling it against its wishes, until it attains the love of goodness and the love of God." His Holiness also states clearly that this is only a 'transitional virtue', but is essential at the start of the acquisition of the virtues and he cites many examples to reinforce this. He also tells us that, "... self-coercion will continue with you until you find pleasure in the life of virtue and then it will leave you spontaneously and the life of love will start. Put before you an important spiritual rule, that is, the biggest war we fight in our spiritual life is the war against ourselves. If we prevail from within through self-coercion we will overcome every other war from without."

Now let us look carefully at several descriptions of humility shared with us by St John and we will find self-coercion used as a means to acquire each:

"Humility is constant forgetfulness of one's achievements,"... "It is the admission that in all the world one is the least important and is also the greatest sinner,"... "It is the mind's awareness that one is weak and helpless,"⁴

How can one simply forget his achievements and accomplishments? This can only be possible if you were to force yourself to ignore the thoughts concerning them and become like our beloved Father, St. Anthony the Great when he, "gave no thought to the passage of time, but day by day, as though he were just beginning the ascetic life, he made greater effort toward perfection. He kept repeating to himself the words of Paul: Forgetting the things that are behind, and reaching out to the things that are ahead."⁵

In order to see oneself as the greatest sinner, one must take the advice of St John and, through using self-coercion, "... drive out empty pride by thinking to the end of their lives, of their past misdeeds, for which they were forgiven and which now serve as a spur to humility. Others, remembering the passion of Christ, think of themselves as eternally in debt. Others hold themselves in contempt when they think of their daily lapses. Others, as a result of their besetting temptations, infirmities and sins, have mortified their pride."⁶

⁴ John Climacus, *John Climacus: The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, ed. Richard J. Payne, trans. Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982), 219.

⁵ St. Athanasius, *St. Athanasius: The Life of Saint Antony*, ed. Johannes Quasten and Joseph C. Plumpe, trans. Robert T. Meyer, vol. 10, *Ancient Christian Writers* (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Newman Press, 1978), 26.

⁶ John Climacus, *John Climacus: The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, ed. Richard J. Payne, trans. Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982).

In our daily prayers we say, “Incline Your ear, O Lord, and hear me, for I am poor and weak... Save Your servant, O my God, who hopes in You. Have mercy on me, O Lord, for to You I will cry the whole day.”⁷ Even these words may not be sincerely felt by all who recite them, but one should force themselves to acknowledge that they are truly weak and helpless as they stand before God, and then we can say with our Father Abraham, “Indeed now, I who am but dust and ashes have taken it upon myself to speak to the Lord”⁸

St John then shares his definition of humility by saying, “Humility is a grace in the soul and with a name known only to those who have had experience of it. It is indescribable wealth, a name and a gift from God. ‘Learn from Me,’ He said; that is, not from an angel, not from a man, not from a book, but ‘from Me,’ that is, from My dwelling within you, from My illumination and action within you, for ‘I am gentle and meek of heart’”⁹

Abba Dorotheos also shares the following with us, “The first type of humility is to think that your brother is smarter than you, and in everything to esteem him higher than yourself and simply, as that saint said, to place oneself below all. The second type is to attribute to God all virtuous deeds. This is the perfect humility of the saints.”¹⁰

How can one practically apply the first type of which he speaks? Let us learn from our beloved Father, St. Anthony the Great who, “... if he heard of a zealous soul anywhere, like a wise bee he left to search him out, nor did he return home before he had seen him; and only when he had received from him, as it were, provisions for his journey to virtue, did he go back”¹¹ We need not go far because here we are surrounded by so many zealous souls! We just need to open our eyes and look at our brethren with a humble, spiritual eye, an eye that perceives everyone around them as being far greater than them. An eye that only looks to the good in those around them. An eye that sees the virtues of each individual, the loving heart of one, the peaceful smile of another, the joyful disposition of yet another. Every person in the community has many beautiful qualities and if we were to focus on them, we could benefit tremendously from one another. One who is striving toward humility always

⁷ Psalm 85:1-3 Coptic Reader Agpeya

⁸ Genesis 18:27 (NKJV)

⁹ John Climacus, John Climacus: The Ladder of Divine Ascent, ed. Richard J. Payne, trans. Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell, The Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982), 219.

¹⁰ Discourses of Dorotheos of Gaza - On Humility

¹¹ St. Athanasius, St. Athanasius: The Life of Saint Antony, ed. Johannes Quasten and Joseph C. Plumpe, trans. Robert T. Meyer, vol. 10, Ancient Christian Writers (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Newman Press, 1978), 20.

desires daily to grow and they see everyone around them as having something to offer them because they see themselves as the least among their brethren, as St John Climacus teaches us. “Those of us who wish to gain understanding must never stop examining ourselves *and if in the perception of your soul you realize that your neighbor is superior to you in all respects, then the mercy of God is surely near at hand.*”¹²

“Now do you perceive the power of lowliness? Do you see the grace attached to this virtue? In point of fact there is nothing more powerful than lowliness. If a painful experience comes to a humble man, straightway he goes against himself, straightway he accuses himself as the one worthy of punishment, and he does not set about accusing anyone or putting the blame on anyone else. For the rest, he goes on his way untroubled, undepressed, in complete peace of mind, and so he has no cause to get angry or to anger anyone else. And so you see, the holy man quite rightly said, ‘Before anything else, we need humility’.”¹³

“Whoever is eager for the peaceful haven of humility will never cease to do all he possibly can to get there, and with words and thoughts, with considerations and explanations, with questionings and probings, with every device, with prayer and supplication, with meditation and reflection, he will push onward, helped by God, humiliated and despised and toiling mightily, and he will sail the ship of his soul out from the ever-stormy ocean of vainglory. For the man delivered from this sin wins ready pardon for all his other sins, like the publican in Scripture.”¹⁴

May God give us the grace to strive daily to acquire this blessed virtue. Amen.

¹² John Climacus, John Climacus: The Ladder of Divine Ascent, ed. Richard J. Payne, trans. Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell, The Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982), 223.

¹³ Dorotheos of Gaza, Dorotheos of Gaza Discourses and Sayings, Cistercian Studies Series (Volume 33, Trans. Eric P. Wheeler, Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1977), 96.

¹⁴ John Climacus, John Climacus: The Ladder of Divine Ascent, ed. Richard J. Payne, trans. Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell, The Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982), 224.