



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

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Thoughts to Start the Year

*“To begin with, let us all have the same zeal, not to give up what we have begun, not to lose heart, nor to say: ‘We have spent a long time in this asceticism.’ No, **beginning over each day, let us increase our zeal. The whole of man’s life is very short measured by the ages to come, so that all our time is as nothing compared to eternal life.**”¹*

St Anthony the Great - The Father of Monks

My beloved brethren, as we begin this new year, let us meditate upon the words of our holy Father, Saint Anthony the Great when he says, ‘Let us all have the same zeal, not to give up what we have begun, not lose heart,’ and ‘the whole of man’s life is very short,’ and let us see how these thoughts can impact us day to day, in a practical way.

St. Athanasius the Apostolic tells us the following about St. Anthony the Great:

*“Accordingly, **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 before, remembering, too, the voice of Elias the Prophet saying: The Lord lives, in whose sight I stand this day. He observed that when he said “this day,” he was not counting the time that was past, **but as though constantly beginning anew, he worked hard each day to make of himself such as one should be to appear before God—pure of heart and ready to follow His will and none other.**”²*

Although this point is very clear, St Athanasius then shares the words of St. Anthony the Great, which expand upon this point,

*“**Indeed, if we, too, live as if we were to die each new day, we shall not sin.** As to the quotation given, its meaning is this: when we awaken each day, we should think that we shall not live till evening; and again, when about to go to sleep we should think that we shall not awaken. Our life is by nature uncertain and is measured out to us daily by Providence. If we are so disposed and live our daily life accordingly, we shall not*

¹ 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), 34.

² 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.

commit sin, nor lust after anything, nor bear a grudge against anyone, nor lay up treasures on earth; *but as men who each day expect to die, we shall be poor and we shall forgive everything to all men.*³

How can one practically think this way daily? In truth, it is very easy because if we look at our spiritual canon, which was prepared for our sake by the holy Fathers who preceded us, we see that they had this thought in their minds as they wrote the litanies for the Agpeya, 'The Book of the Hours'. As we begin our day with the Midnight Hour, in the First Watch we pray saying, "Behold, the Bridegroom is coming at midnight, *blessed is the servant whom He finds watching...* O my soul, be mindful of that awesome day, and wake up and light your lamp with the oil of joy, *for you do not know when the voice will call upon you saying*, 'Behold, the Bridegroom is coming.'" And in the Third Watch, we pray saying, "With a compassionate eye, O Lord, look at my weakness, *for shortly my life will end*, and in my deeds I shall have no salvation." And again, toward the end of our day, we pray from the Twelfth hour saying, "*Behold, I am about to stand before the just Judge*, terrified and trembling because of my many sins... Therefore, arise from the slumber of laziness and entreat the Savior, repenting and saying, "God have mercy on me and save me."⁴

One need not ask oneself why the words are written in such a way, the answer is shown clearly in the life and thoughts of our holy Father, Saint Anthony. When one prays these words daily in their canon, they must not only adopt these words as their own, but they should also take possession of the thought that accompanies these words. What if I truly was, 'about to stand before the just judge,' at the very next moment in time? What would I do? Would I delay my repentance? Would I delay my confession? Or would I run to God in prayer and pour out my heart to Him, as I share all the things that I've done that have separated me from Him. Would I not then also run to find my Father of Confession, to open my heart to him and seek absolution for all the sins that I have committed that separated me from God and from my brethren? After this I would examine myself and see if there was anyone whom I upset and with whom I had not spoken in some time and I would seek them out and reconcile. I would humble myself and prostrate before them and sincerely ask for their forgiveness. Do you see how this thought can cause you to immediately repent and confess and reconcile all your differences with those around you? The thought of death is powerful in that it can return us to God immediately, regardless of how far we had strayed.

St Anthony teaches us to never say that, "***We have spent a long time in this asceticism,***" but, "***beginning over each day, let us increase our zeal.***"⁵ We also read in the Desert Fathers the following story, "There was an elder in the district of the Thebaid named Hierax who had lived for about ninety years. Wishing to cast him into accidie through his longevity, the demons set upon him one day, saying: "What are you going to do, elder, for you have another fifty years to live?" In answer he said to them: "You have greatly distressed me, because I made

³ 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), 36.

⁴ Coptic Reader Agpeya

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), 34.

preparations for two hundred years” — and they went away from him, howling.”⁶ What can one understand from this saying except that he continuously increased his zeal? The demons tried to have him relax by telling him that he had much more time than one would normally expect, because they thought that he was struggling too hard, yet, little did they know, he was actually struggling very hard because of his honesty and love for God, not because he was doing to die imminently, since he actually thought he would live two hundred years, therefore he increased his struggle *four-fold* after the demons attempted to have him relax. Their plot was turned upside down because of the words of St Anthony!

“Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.”⁷

May the Lord grant us the grace to renew our zeal from day to day and to remember why we left the world, as St Arsenius the Great used to say to himself constantly, ‘Arsenius, what have you come for?’⁸

⁶ John Wortley, *The Anonymous Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 29. John Wortley, *The Anonymous Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 29.

⁷ Hebrews 12:1 (NKJV)

⁸ Dorotheos of Gaza, *Dorotheos of Gaza Discourses and Sayings*, Cistercian Studies Series (Volume 33, Trans. Eric P. Wheeler, Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1977), 163.