



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

**February 2024**

### **On Blessed Obedience**

“Like trees swayed by the wind and driving their roots deeper into the ground, those who live in obedience become strong and unshakable souls.”

St John of the Ladder - Step 4 on Obedience

My beloved brethren, let us examine the importance of obedience in the life of the early monastics and let us grasp their understanding of this great virtue.

It is necessary to note that it is inevitable that we mention humility in our discussion about obedience because these virtues are so intertwined, that it is, at times, difficult to distinguish between the two. How so? Let us read the words of Abba Dorotheos of Gaza on humility and we shall find obedience clearly amidst his thoughts, yet he does not say the word explicitly:

‘Before anything else we need humility: being ready to listen whenever a word is spoken to us, and to say, “I submit”, because through humility every device of the enemy, every kind of obstacle, is destroyed.’

One can say that Abba Dorotheos sees obedience as simply a self-imposed act of humility. He also stresses the need for the unity of these two virtues when he says the following:

“Just as horses are yoked together in a chariot so that one does not outstep the other, so obedience needs to have humility yoked together with it. How can a man be worthy of this grace, unless, as I said, he treats himself harshly to cut off the desires of his own and to give himself, after God, to his [spiritual] father, without hesitation, doing everything with full confidence as though obeying God. Such a man is worthy to find mercy, such a man is worthy to find salvation.”

We can also see the same spirit of thought when we examine again the words of His Holiness, the Thrice Blessed, Pope Shenouda III, of blessed memory, as he taught us in his book ‘Characteristics of the Spiritual Path’, that the acquisition of the virtues requires the use of force, or self-coercion. Hence we can say that in order to begin acquiring this blessed virtue of obedience, we must forcefully humble ourselves and break our will and do the will of others instead. St John of the Ladder reinforces this reality by saying, “Obedience is the burial place of the will and the resurrection of lowliness,” and lowliness is by definition, the act or state of being humble.

Further on St John of the Ladder says the following, “Blessed is he who mortifies his will to the very end and who leaves the care of himself to his director in the Lord. He will be placed at the right hand of the Crucified.”

The intimate connection between obedience and humility is made very clear in the writings of both of these blessed Fathers. The words of St John of the Ladder quoted here are all from step 4 on obedience, but the quotes of Abba Dorotheos are from his 'Discourse on Humility', yet they are perfectly in harmony with one another, and you can use both words interchangeably in many of the quotes presented here.

Abba Dorotheos goes on to say that, "In point of fact humility protects the soul from all the passions and also from every temptation. When Blessed Anthony saw all the snares of the devil spread out everywhere, he sighed, and asked God how anyone could ever avoid them. God answered him, 'Humility. It is humility that enables you to escape them all!' And what is more astonishing, he added, 'They cannot even touch you'."

He also adds in his 'Discourse on Renunciation' the following:

"Listen to what the Lord himself tells us: 'Learn of me, for I am meek and humble of heart and you shall find rest for your souls.' There you have it in a nutshell: he has taught us the root and cause of all evils and also the remedy for it, leading to all good. He shows us that pretensions to superiority [pride] cast us down and that it is impossible to obtain mercy except by the contrary, that is to say, by humility. Self-elevation begets contempt and disobedience begets perdition, whereas humility begets obedience and the saving of souls. And I call that real humility which is not humble in word and outward appearance but is deeply planted in the very heart; for this is what he meant when he said that 'I am meek and humble of heart'."

Abba Dorotheos goes on to say later in this discourse, "that you may learn how obedience, and not following one's own will, snatched a man from death."

From the writings of these holy Fathers, we can learn the following, obedience and humility are both essential elements of our spiritual lives, especially as monastics. It is through obedience that we can acquire humility, and humility grants many blessings in our lives.

We can summarize the words of St John of the Ladder and Abba Dorotheos as follows:

"Obedience is the burial place of the will and the resurrection of lowliness [humility], and through humility, every device of the enemy, every kind of obstacle, is destroyed, and because of this such a man is worthy to find mercy, such a man is worthy to find salvation. He will be placed at the right hand of the Crucified and will soon have his sins forgiven. 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 finally, that you may learn how obedience, and not following one's own will, snatched a man from death."

May God give us the grace to strive daily to acquire this blessed virtue so that we be saved from death. Amen.