



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

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On Repentance

“He who really keeps track of what he has done will consider as lost every day during which he did not mourn, regardless of whatever good he may happen to have done.”¹

St John Climacus - Step 5 On Penitence

My beloved brethren, the Holy Great Fast is now upon us and it is a time for fasting and repentance. It is a time to allow the Holy Spirit to search our hearts and convict us of the sin that separates us from God. A time to strive to acquire the virtues that will allow us to become more Christ-like and aid us in our struggle against the vices that are opposed to them.

“Repentance is the renewal of baptism and is a contract with God for a fresh start in life. Repentance goes shopping for humility and is ever distrustful of bodily comfort. Repentance is critical awareness and a sure watch over oneself.”²

What can be meant here a ‘critical awareness and a sure watch over oneself’ other than to sit with oneself daily to examine our thoughts and actions? To examine where we have fallen short, to see if we have offended anyone, even if unintentionally, and to see what good could have been done that wasn’t. We should spend time daily to review all our actions and more importantly, our thoughts that preceded those actions. How much of our day do we simply let our thoughts run aimlessly, how often are we aware of every thought that is entering our mind and shaping our actions? St Macarius the Great tells us that, “... the Lord demands of you that you be angry with yourself and *engage in battle with your mind, neither consenting to or taking pleasure in wicked thoughts.*”³ Then we can say with David the Prophet, “Let the words of my mouth and *the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer.*”⁴

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), 130.

² *Ibid*, 121.

³ Pseudo-Macarius, *“Homily 3,”* in *Pseudo-Macarius: The Fifty Spiritual Homilies and the Great Letter*, ed. George A. Maloney and Bernard McGinn, trans. George A. Maloney, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1992), 48.

⁴ *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), Ps 19:14.

“Repentance is the daughter of hope and the refusal to despair. (The penitent stands guilty—but un-disgraced.) *Repentance is reconciliation with the Lord by the performance of good deeds which are the opposites of the sins.* It is the purification of conscience and the voluntary endurance of affliction.”⁵

As St John teaches us, it is essential that, after our repentance, we focus on performing good deeds, virtuous deeds, because they oppose the vices that attack us. For example, when one is focused on doing acts of love toward their brethren, they will not be selfish, for their heart's desire is to give and to sacrifice themselves for others. When you focus on being very honest and diligent in your work daily, you will be opposing laziness and you'll become like the great St Anthony, for it was said of him that, ‘he was also diligent in his labor’⁶. When you are careful to be patient with your brethren in every situation, you will be fighting the anger that may arise in the heart due to impatience. There are very practical ways to apply every virtue throughout our day to fight against the vices that may war against us.

*“Do not be surprised if you fall every day and do not surrender. Stand your ground bravely. And you may be sure that your guardian angel will respect your endurance. A fresh, warm wound is easier to heal than those that are old, neglected, and festering, and that need extensive treatment, surgery, bandaging, and cauterization. Long neglect can render many of them incurable. However, all things are possible with God.”*⁷

In this passage, St. John is echoing the words of scriptures from Micah which say, ‘Do not rejoice over me, my enemy; When I fall, I will arise.’⁸ This concept is essential to understand because we are constantly in a struggle. St Macarius the Great tells us the following, “Still, to uproot sin and the evil that is so imbedded in our sinning can be done only by divine power, *for it is impossible and outside man's competence to uproot sin. To struggle, yes, to continue to fight, to inflict blows, and to receive setbacks is in your power.* To uproot, however, belongs to God alone. If you could have done it on your own, what would have been the need for the coming of the Lord?”⁹ Here he makes it clear that in our struggle against the vices, we may at times receive setbacks, but we should not lose heart! We turn to God in humility and He will give us the strength and the grace to begin acquiring the virtue that will oppose this vice in our life. St. John also makes a significant point, that a fresh, warm wound is easier to heal than an old one, therefore it is essential to address our weaknesses immediately which led us to fall, and in doing so, we will get back up quickly. But if God forbid, we remain fallen for a time, it is

⁵ 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), 121.

⁶ Athanasius of Alexandria, [*Athanasius: The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*](#), ed. Richard J. Payne, trans. Robert C. Gregg, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1980), 70.

⁷ 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), 130.

⁸ [*The New King James Version*](#) (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), Mic 7:8.

⁹ Pseudo-Macarius, [*“Homily 3,”*](#) in *Pseudo-Macarius: The Fifty Spiritual Homilies and the Great Letter*, ed. George A. Maloney and Bernard McGinn, trans. George A. Maloney, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1992), 48.

more difficult to arise, because our wound will need much more effort to be healed, so let us run to God in repentance immediately, and let us not delay our confession.

St Basil the Great says, “We have been injured by sin; let us be healed by repentance. But repentance is futile without fasting... It is because we did not fast that we were banished from paradise. So let us fast that we may return to it.”¹⁰

May God accept our fasting and repentance and grant us the forgiveness of our sins.

¹⁰ St Basil the Great, *On Fasting and Feasts*, ed. John Behr, trans. Susan R. Holman and Mark DelCogliano, vol. 50, *Popular Patristics Series* (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2013), 57.