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

April 2024

On Virtues

"An old man was asked, "What is the work of monks?" And he said, "To cultivate all the virtues, to make themselves strangers to all wickedness, and to be watchful against judging and condemning others; prayer, and obedience, and the cultivation of the virtues are the mirror of the monk."[1]

The Paradise of the Holy Fathers

My beloved brethren, it is commonly said that the solution to every problem is within us, but how so? How is it that we can resolve matters when many times the situations are seemingly outside of our control? Let us examine how the early Monastic Fathers understood the virtues and then we will see how this is true.

Saint Antony the Great tells us the following about virtue:

> "*Having therefore made a beginning, and set out already on the way of virtue, let us press forward to what lies ahead*. And let none turn back as Lot's wife did, especially since the Lord said, no one who puts his hand to the plow and turns back is fit for the Kingdom of heaven. Now 'turning back' is nothing except feeling regret and once more thinking about things of the world. *But do not be afraid to hear about virtue, and do not be a stranger to the term. For it is not distant from us, nor does it stand external to us, but its realization lies in us, and the task is easy if only we shall will it.* Now the Greeks leave home and traverse the sea in order to gain an education, but there is no need for us to go abroad on account of the Kingdom of heaven, nor to cross the sea for virtue. For the Lord has told us before, the Kingdom of God is within you. *All virtue needs, then, is our willing, since it is in us, and arises from us. For virtue exists when the soul maintains its intellectual part according to nature.* It holds fast according to nature when it remains as it was made—and it was made beautiful and perfectly straight. As far as the soul is concerned, being straight consists in its intellectual part's being according to nature, as it was created. But when it turns from its course and is twisted away from what it naturally is, then we speak of the vice of the soul. So the task is not difficult, for if we remain as we were made, we are in virtue, but if we turn our thoughts toward contemptible things, we are condemned as evil. *If the task depended on something external that must be procured, it would be truly difficult, but since the matter centers in us,* let us protect ourselves from sordid ideas, and, since we

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[1] Ernest A. Wallis Budge, ed., The Paradise or Garden of the Holy Fathers, vol. 2 (London: Chatto & Windus, 1907), 196.

> have received it as a trust, let us preserve the soul for the Lord, so that he may recognize his work as being just the same as he made it.[2]

There is so much depth to the words of our beloved Father Saint Antony, so let us examine them so that we understand more about virtue. He tells us that, "*it is not distant from us, nor does it stand external to us, but its realization lies in us, and the task is easy if only we shall will it,"* and *"For the Lord has told us before, the Kingdom of God is within you.*" He is making a very clear connection between two things, the fact that the virtues are already within us, in our soul, since it was created "*beautiful and perfectly straight*", and the Kingdom of God which is in us, as our Lord told us in Luke 17:21. Therefore we do not need to look outside of ourselves as he continues by saying, *"all virtue needs, then, is our willing, since it is in us, and arises from us. For virtue exists when the soul maintains its intellectual part according to nature."* We know that every kingdom has great treasures stored within, and our treasures are the virtues that God gave us when we were created, as St. Antony says, "*for if we remain as we were made, we are in virtue*". Let us see what these virtues are by looking to the 'Hymn of the Virtues', many of which are also the same as the fruit of the Spirit mentioned in Galatians 5:22-23. In this blessed hymn there are twelve virtues mentioned which are love, hope, faith, purity, virginity, peace, wisdom, righteousness, meekness, patience, longsuffering and self-control. Each one of these virtues has a vice that opposes it, as St. Antony also tells us, "*But when it [the soul] turns from its course and is twisted away from what it naturally is, then we speak of the vice of the soul.*" Therefore from this we learn that when we turn away from our course, we introduce into our soul the vices which are in opposition to the virtues, and it is our responsibility to reacquire the virtues which will eliminate the vices within us, by the grace of God.

Abba Dorotheos tells us the following: "*Do not consider virtues excessively difficult or unattainable*, but make at least a little effort and have confidence in God. Show him your enthusiasm and zeal and *you will see the help he brings towards your success.*"[3] It is essential to establish that the virtues are not hard to attain, but we must at first make some effort and then allow the grace of God to give us more strength. If we consider that each virtue is like a ladder ascending to the heavens with an innumerable number of rungs on it, let us ascend, one by one, and with each rung we step on, we will see the grace of God pushing us onward to ascend further and further, and with every step, we will acquire a greater knowledge of each virtue and a deeper understanding of how to use them in our daily lives.

> "*The man who desires, with God's help, to come to such an enviable state must not say the virtues are too great for him or that they cannot be reached.* For this is either failing

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[2] 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), 46.

[3] Dorotheos of Gaza, Dorotheos of Gaza Discourses and Sayings, Cistercian Studies Series (Volume 33, Trans. Eric P. Wheeler, Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1977), 206.

> to hope in God's help or shrinking from something good. Whatever virtues you desire you have only to practice *and you will see that you have in yourself power to succeed*. See what it says: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Because you are conscious of how far you are from virtue, do not be a coward and ask, 'How can I love my neighbor as myself? How can I pay attention to his troubles as to my own, especially those hidden in his heart which I cannot see or even know: How can I consider them my own?' Do not excuse your slothfulness with thoughts like these."[4]

In his discourse on the virtues, Abba Dorotheos gives a beautiful analogy of how the soul is similar to a house being built:

> "And I will tell you how to do it: First he must lay the foundation, which is faith. Without faith, as the Apostle says, it is impossible to please God. So, according to our comparison, it is impossible to build our [spiritual] house without this foundation [viz. faith]. Is there occasion for obedience? A stone must be laid, obedience. Does a disagreement arise among the brethren? The stone of patience must be laid. Is there need for self-control? That stone too must be laid. So whatever the virtue required, that stone must be laid in the building, and in this way the perimeter of the building rises up. One stone for forbearance, another for mortifying self-will, one for meekness, and so on. In all this, great attention must be paid to perseverance and courage: these are the cornerstones of the building and by them the house is held together and all is united to all so that they do not lean over and fall apart; without these a man will not succeed in perfecting any of the virtues. If a man has no courage in his soul, he will not endure with patience, and if he has no patience he cannot entirely succeed. Therefore, it is said, 'In patience you shall possess your souls.' Similarly, the builder must set his stones in mortar. If he piles up his stones without mortar, the stones come apart and the house falls down. The mortar is humility, which is composed from the earth and lies under the feet of all. *Any virtue existing without humility is no virtue at all*, as it says in the sayings of the Elders: 'As it is impossible to construct a ship without nails, so there is no hope of being saved without humility.' Whatever a good man does, he must do with humility so that what he does is kept safe. But besides all this, the house needs what are called tie-beams or braces — that is to say discretion — which, besides adding much to its appearance, draws the whole building together. The roof is charity, which is the completion of virtue as the roof completes the house. After the roof comes the crowning of the dwelling place; and what is this crowning? In the Law it is written, 'If you build yourself a house and make it your dwelling place, put a crown round your house [i.e. railings around the flat roof] lest your children fall from the roof.' The crown is humility. For that is the crown and guardian of all the virtues. As each virtue needs humility for its acquisition — and in that sense we said each stone is laid with the mortar of humility — so also the perfection of all the virtues is humility. The saints, while making progress towards this perfection, came to humility — this is why we are always saying that the man who is getting closer to God looks on himself more and more as a sinner… So it is completed, it has its protecting walls, its roof of virtues; there it is, the house of

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[4] Ibid, 205–206.

> perfection we are speaking of, complete with its crowning virtue of humility and all that it needs to complete it."[5]

We can now see clearly, from the words of our holy Fathers, St. Antony and Abba Dorotheous, that the solution to every problem is within us because of the virtues which we must strive to acquire. Abba Dorotheos gives many examples throughout his discourse such as when he said, "*Does a disagreement arise among the brethren? The stone of patience must be laid. Is there need for self-control? That stone too must be laid*." If we further expand upon his analogy of the house being built, we can say that as we encounter any situation before us, if we have not yet laid that particular brick of a virtue, we have to add it to our home. To do this we must first acknowledge that we are lacking in this particular virtue which would have been the perfect solution for what we are facing at that very moment, and then we will lay, brick by brick, all the virtues needed to respond to the situations we face throughout our lives.

What are some practical steps that we can take in order to do so? One must first sit with oneself and go over the twelve virtues and assess where they are on the ladder of every virtue. We can also learn from our confession which virtues we need because every vice has a virtue that will fight against it. After we do so, then we must study the virtue and understand it in order to know how to acquire it. We can search for it in the Holy Bible and see how it was used by the righteous men and women throughout history. We can read about the virtues in the writings of the Early Fathers, especially the Monastic Fathers. We can also look to the Saints who lived from Biblical times to our contemporary times and see which virtues they had and how they utilized them in their lives. Once we understand the virtue, we can seek out opportunities to put the virtue into practice in order to grow in it. For example, if one desires to grow in the virtue of love, we know that love is manifest in our actions, therefore we can see how we can serve our brethren and offer love to them. We can find opportunities to work together and help one another, we can give gifts to new members of our community to make them feel loved and accepted, and we can ask about those who are sick and serve them in their time of need. There are so many ways that each virtue can be practiced and one needs to diligently seek ways to grow in every virtue.

"He who taketh care to keep these virtues shall be able to be saved by the mercy of God."[6]

May the Lord grant us to attain the virtues which will allow us to become more Christ-like with every passing day.

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[5] Dorotheos of Gaza, Dorotheos of Gaza Discourses and Sayings, Cistercian Studies Series (Volume 33, Trans. Eric P. Wheeler, Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1977), 203.

[6] Ernest A. Wallis Budge, ed., The Paradise or Garden of the Holy Fathers, vol. 2 (London: Chatto & Windus, 1907), 278.