



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

**May 2024**

### **Be Attentive to Yourself**

*"Be attentive to yourself, lest an unlawful word come to be hidden in your heart" [Deut 15:9]. Do not spend time through thoughts scrutinizing the weakness that belongs to another, but be attentive to yourself, that is, turn the eye of your soul to inquire about things that belong to you."*<sup>1</sup>

**Saint Basil the Great**

My beloved brethren, our Lord Jesus Christ taught us saying, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God"<sup>2</sup> But how can one keep their heart pure throughout the day? It is by remaining focused on ourselves and especially on our every thought and action. Our thoughts are the precursor to actions, therefore we must be sure that our thoughts are pure and acceptable before God so that our actions will also be pure. Let us examine the words of Saint Basil the Great and Abba Dorotheos to learn how to deal with our thoughts as well as our actions.

St Basil the Great says that, "... actions done through the body need time and opportunity and labors and co-workers and other requirements. *But the movements of the mind operate timelessly, are completed without weariness, are constructed effortlessly, and are convenient on every occasion.*" He goes on to give an example by saying, "Perhaps someone haughty who looks down on propriety, though clothed in the outward appearance of sobriety and sitting among many who call him blessed for his virtue, has run away in his mind to the place of sin in a hidden movement of his heart... *Therefore be on guard lest at any time there come a lawless hidden word in your heart* [Deut 15:9]."<sup>3</sup> He makes it clear that our attention must be

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<sup>1</sup> Nonna Verna Harrison Sr., "Preface," in **On the Human Condition**, ed. John Behr and Augustine Casiday, trans. Nonna Verna Harrison, Popular Patristics Series, Number 30 (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2005), 100.

<sup>2</sup> The New King James Version (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), Mt 5:8.

<sup>3</sup> Nonna Verna Harrison Sr., "Preface," in **On the Human Condition**, ed. John Behr and Augustine Casiday, trans. Nonna Verna Harrison, Popular Patristics Series, Number 30 (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2005), 94.

on the thoughts, which can later produce sinful actions, and since those actions need time and opportunity, we must rather use this time to struggle against those thoughts, instead of going along with them, so that we do not fall into sin.

Abba Dorotheos discusses how to examine our innermost thoughts, our conscience, and says, "In attending to our conscience, we need to consider many different factors. A man needs to satisfy his conscience towards God, towards his neighbor, and towards material things."<sup>4</sup> He continues to explain how to do so by giving some examples, "As regards God: he must not despise God's precepts, even those concerning things which are not seen by men or those things for which one is not accountable to men. A man should obey his conscience in relation to God; for example, did he neglect his prayer? If an evil thought came into his heart, was he vigilant and did he keep control of himself or did he entertain it? He sees his neighbor saying something or doing something; does he suspect it's evil and condemn him? *To put it simply, all the hidden things that happen inside us, things which no one sees except God and our conscience, we need to take account of.* This is what I mean by our conscience towards God."<sup>5</sup> If we constantly remember that God is listening to every thought in our minds, this will help us to be more careful. When an inappropriate thought comes to us, we can reach out to God and pray saying, "God, please take these thoughts away from me and please give me the strength to ignore them if they come again. Let me see only the good in my neighbor and the weaknesses in myself, rather than the opposite." We must realize that any thoughts that make us focus on others are simply distracting us and making it more difficult for us to see our own sins. Saint Basil tells us to, "Only be attentive to yourself, that you may recognize the strength and illness *of your soul*."<sup>6</sup>

Abba Dorotheos continues and says, "To respect our conscience towards our neighbor means not to do anything that we think may trouble or harm our neighbor in deed, or word, or gesture, or look."<sup>7</sup> While you'll notice he already mentioned our neighbor earlier, it was in regards to God and to the thoughts that never became action, but here he is discussing what happens next when we dwell on those thoughts and they become actions, even something as simple as a gesture or a look. He continues saying "For there are gestures, as I very often tell

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<sup>4</sup> Dorotheos of Gaza, *Dorotheos of Gaza Discourses and Sayings*, Cistercian Studies Series (Volume 33, Trans. Eric P. Wheeler, Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1977), 106.

<sup>5</sup> Dorotheos of Gaza, *Dorotheos of Gaza Discourses and Sayings*, Cistercian Studies Series (Volume 33, Trans. Eric P. Wheeler, Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1977), 106.

<sup>6</sup> Nonna Verna Harrison Sr., "Preface," in *On the Human Condition*, ed. John Behr and Augustine Casiday, trans. Nonna Verna Harrison, Popular Patristics Series, Number 30 (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2005), 97.

<sup>7</sup> Dorotheos of Gaza, *Dorotheos of Gaza Discourses and Sayings*, Cistercian Studies Series (Volume 33, Trans. Eric P. Wheeler, Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1977), 106–107.

you, which hurt our neighbors and there are looks capable of wounding him and, to speak plainly, whatever a man does readily, knowing it gives his neighbor a bad thought stains his own conscience because it means that he is ready to harm or trouble his neighbor — and this is the sort of thing I mean by keeping a good conscience towards our neighbor.”<sup>8</sup> Why does this happen? It is because we have not pushed away the bad thoughts that only God heard initially, but rather we have become overcome by them and they have now turned into an inappropriate gesture or even a bad look. This is why he mentions them in this order, for if we were to first think about how God would perceive such thoughts in our mind, we would have never allowed them to turn into an action that hurt our neighbor. Saint Basil says, “Do not spend time through thoughts scrutinizing the weakness that belongs to another, but be attentive to yourself, that is, turn the eye of your soul to inquire about things that belong to you.”<sup>9</sup>

Abba Dorotheos also says the following, “As regards keeping a good conscience in respect of material things: not to use things badly, not to render things useless, not to leave things about, and when we find things left about not to leave them even if they are of small value, but to pick them up and put them in their proper place. Not to be slovenly about our clothes or wear them out too quickly... and always be asking for new. These things are against the conscience. Similarly about the bed, often when one can make do with a small mattress, one asks for a large one; and when one has a blanket, one wants to exchange it for a new one or a better one for the sake of prestige or from mere thoughtlessness... Or one approaches one of the brethren and says, ‘Why has so-and-so got such a thing and I haven’t?’ Such a man is not on the right road... It is the same about food: a man is perfectly able to satisfy the needs of his body with bread, vegetables, and few olives, but he gives up doing so and seeks something more tasty and more expensive — all this is against the conscience.”<sup>10</sup>

“Let us be zealous, brothers, to guard our conscience for as long as we are in this world and not to neglect its promptings in anything. And let us not tread it underfoot even in the least thing, for you can see that from the smallest things, which of their nature are worth little, we come to despise the great things. When we begin to say, ‘What is it if I say just these few words? What does it matter if I eat this morsel? What difference if I poke my nose in here or there? From this way of saying, ‘What does this or that matter?’ a man takes evil and bitter nourishment and begins presently to despise greater and more serious things and even to tread down his own conscience and so, at last destroying it, bit by bit.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 106–107.

<sup>9</sup> Nonna Verna Harrison Sr., “Preface,” in *On the Human Condition*, ed. John Behr and Augustine Casiday, trans. Nonna Verna Harrison, Popular Patristics Series, Number 30 (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2005), 100.

<sup>10</sup> Dorotheos of Gaza, *Dorotheos of Gaza Discourses and Sayings*, Cistercian Studies Series (Volume 33, Trans. Eric P. Wheeler, Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1977), 107.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 105.

“The Fathers tell us that a monk ought not to give his conscience occasion to reproach him about anything at all. It is necessary, therefore, brothers, to keep watch over ourselves always and to keep ourselves away from all these things lest we fall into danger. For our Lord also will bring an indictment against us, as we have said above.

May God grant we listen and be attentive to these things, lest the sayings of our Fathers turn out to be for us words of condemnation.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> **Ibid, 107.**