



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

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***"Let us look to ourselves and be sober, brothers. Who will give us
back this present time if we waste it?"¹***

Abba Dorotheos on Vigilance and Sobriety

My beloved brethren, our Lord Jesus Christ told us to, "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."² Abba Dorotheos discusses the need for vigilance and starts with the following introduction, which contains several points about how can remain focused and vigilant:

"Abba Arsenius was always saying to himself, 'Arsenius, what have you come for?' We are in such a negligent and ruinous condition that we don't know why we have come; we don't know even what we want and, therefore, we make no progress, but we are always distressed. This comes about because we have no set purpose in our hearts and actually if we were to resolve to fight a little, in a short time we should not find life distressing or laborious. For if from the beginning a man does violence to himself and struggles with himself a little, in a short time he makes progress and afterwards he goes on peacefully, when God, seeing that he does violence to himself, brings him help. We must, then, do ourselves violence. Let us lay down a good foundation, let us meanwhile desire what is good. Evidently we are not yet perfect, but at least we desire to be so, and this is the beginning of our salvation. For from this desire we shall come in God's company both into the combat and through the combat. So will a man be helped in acquiring the virtues."³

The first point that Abba Dorotheos makes is that we have lost sight of why we have come. It is essential to constantly recall why we have left the world and joined the Monastery. In the Ladder of Divine Ascent, St John Climacus tells us that, "All this is done by those who willingly turn from the things of this life, either for the sake of the coming kingdom, or because of the number of their sins, or on account of their love of God."⁴ Have we left the world behind because of the coming kingdom? If so, we should have no desire for the things

¹ Dorotheos of Gaza, Dorotheos of Gaza Discourses and Sayings, Cistercian Studies Series (Volume 33, Trans. Eric P. Wheeler, Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1977), 163.

² The New King James Version (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), Mt 25:13.

³ Dorotheos of Gaza, Dorotheos of Gaza Discourses and Sayings, Cistercian Studies Series (Volume 33, Trans. Eric P. Wheeler, Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1977), 163–164.

⁴ 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), 74.

of this passing world. We should be constantly thinking about God and all the Saints and our loved ones who are awaiting us in the Paradise of Joy. We must meditate on their lives and strive to emulate their deeds. If we constantly thought about the coming kingdom, we would not be arguing over petty matters concerning material things that have nothing to do with our eternal life. Are we focused on repenting daily? Do we constantly examine our actions and see if they were beneficial or if we caused harm to ourselves or to others around us? Or are we focused on the sins and struggles of those around us? It is easy to lose sight of the reason we left when we become distracted by what is happening around us, but when we look at ourselves, we will remain focused. Do we remember the love of God, who, “demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us”⁵? Do, “we love Him because He first loved us.”⁶? Are we constantly looking to the Cross and remembering His great love for us? If we meditate deeply on the cross we will be brought to tears recalling all the things we did that caused Him to suffer and die for us and we will turn and repent. After this we will rejoice in our salvation and our tears of sorrow will be turned into tears of joy.

The second point Abba Dorotheos makes is that “we don’t know even what we want and, therefore, we make no progress, but we are always distressed... because we have no set purpose in our hearts.” In the Conferences we learn from Abbot Moses that, “The end of our profession, as we have said, is the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven; but the goal or *scopos* is purity of heart, without which it is impossible for anyone to reach that end.”⁷ We all desire to reach the kingdom therefore we must do daily that which will allow us to reach our final destination in peace. Abbot Moses gives the example of a farmer who will withstand terrible weather and extreme heat to work daily in his fields because his ultimate goal is to have a rich harvest with abundant crops. He knows that unless he works bit by bit every day, despite any difficulty that he faces, he’ll never reach his ultimate goal and in the same way, we must daily focus on purifying our hearts. “Whatever therefore can direct us to this *scopos*, which is purity of heart, is to be pursued with all our strength, but whatever deters us from this is to be avoided as dangerous and harmful.”⁸

The third point Abba Dorotheos makes is, “For if from the beginning a man does violence to himself and struggles with himself a little, in a short time he makes progress and afterwards he goes on peacefully, when God, seeing that he does violence to himself, brings him help.” Regarding this St John Climacus says, “It is detestable and dangerous for a wrestler to be slack at the start of a contest, thereby giving proof of his impending defeat to everyone. Let us have a firm beginning to our religious life, for this will help us if a certain slackness comes later. A bold and eager soul will be spurred on by the memory of its first zeal and new wings can thus be obtained.”⁹

⁵ The New King James Version (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), Ro 5:8.

⁶ The New King James Version (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), 1 Jn 4:19

⁷ John Cassian, John Cassian: The Conferences, ed. Walter J. Burghardt, John Dillon, and Dennis D. McManus, trans. Boniface Ramsey, vol. 57, Ancient Christian Writers (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Newman Press, 1997), 43.

⁸ John Cassian, John Cassian: The Conferences, ed. Walter J. Burghardt, John Dillon, and Dennis D. McManus, trans. Boniface Ramsey, vol. 57, Ancient Christian Writers (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Newman Press, 1997), 43.

⁹ 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), 76.

Lastly, the fourth point Abba Dorotheos makes is about the virtues. He says that if we do everything he previously stated, then “will a man be helped in acquiring the virtues.” Therefore he is saying that once we have reexamined why we left the world and understand our daily goal and then struggle to achieve it, then God will help us to acquire the virtues. “If anyone wants to acquire virtue he ought not to let himself be distracted or be puffed up with vain hopes... He must not interest himself in anything else but, day and night, attend to it, so that he may be able to master it... For unless a man drives himself and fights against his evil inclinations he readily falls away and diverges from the path of virtue.”¹⁰ He goes on to say, “Let everyone find out then where he is; how many milestones he has passed on the road. We ought not only to examine ourselves every day but also over a period of time, every month, and every week.”¹¹

May God grant us vigilance so that we may “be like men who wait for their master, when he will return from the wedding, that when he comes and knocks they may open to him immediately. Blessed are those servants whom the master, when he comes, will find watching.”¹²

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¹⁰ Dorotheos of Gaza, *Dorotheos of Gaza Discourses and Sayings*, Cistercian Studies Series (Volume 33, Trans. Eric P. Wheeler, Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1977), 164–165.

¹¹ Dorotheos of Gaza, *Dorotheos of Gaza Discourses and Sayings*, Cistercian Studies Series (Volume 33, Trans. Eric P. Wheeler, Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1977), 170.

¹² The New King James Version (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), Lk 12:36–37.