



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

### April 2025 On Joy, Prayer, and Giving Thanks

*“I gave thanks unto God, Who has delivered me from the impurity of this world, and from everlasting punishment, and Who has brought me to this labor of angels, and with such things I remembered God and rejoiced.”<sup>1</sup>*

#### **The Paradise of the Holy Fathers**

My beloved brethren, as we are approaching the Holy Fifty Days, let us study the words of St. Paul when he said to us, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”<sup>2</sup>

In a sermon on *Giving Thanks* by St Basil the Great, he says the following: “You have heard the Apostle’s saying, which he taught to the Thessalonians *as a rule for all of life. Indeed, the teaching is for everyone, whatever their condition in life; the profit extends to all humankind.* Rejoice always, he says; pray without ceasing; give thanks in all circumstances.”<sup>3</sup> And as though he were speaking directly to us, as monastics, he says, “He not only invites those who are enjoying what is good to rejoice always, *but also those who no longer live in the flesh, in whom Christ lives, who for the highest good permit no association with the burdens of the flesh...* Thus it is that insult, punishment, death of relatives cannot trample the spirit nor upend the lofty soul into suffering. *Those in this frame of mind, who are pulled into some distress, will have little sorrow as they endure painful misfortune.*”<sup>4</sup> There are many stories in the Paradise of the Holy Fathers about monks rejoicing in situations which, to a worldling, do not make any sense. One such story is about Abba Pior, who worked tirelessly in the fields reaping crops for three summers in a row and yet was never paid for his hard work, but it was said of him that he “*rejoiced that he had been defrauded of his hire.*”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ernest A. Wallis Budge, ed., *The Paradise or Garden of the Holy Fathers*, vol. 2 (London: Chatto & Windus, 1907), 136–142.

<sup>2</sup> The New King James Version (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), 1 Th 5:16–18

<sup>3</sup> 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), 97.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 98–99.

<sup>5</sup> Ernest A. Wallis Budge, ed., *The Paradise or Garden of the Holy Fathers*, vol. 2 (London: Chatto & Windus, 1907), 43.

The life of St. Paul is also filled with situations which do not make sense to men of this world, as St. Basil shares: “This was the mind of the Apostle, *who rejoiced in weakness, distress, beatings, violence, boasting in what made him weak: in hunger and thirst, in cold and nakedness, in persecution and anguish, what was unbearable to others, and made them weary of life.* Indeed, the ones who do not know and share the Apostle’s conviction, with his admonition to the gospel life, dare to complain against Paul, saying that this command is impossible for us. *They must learn how many opportunities God’s generosity offers us to a reasonable joy.*”<sup>6</sup> We, too, must oppose the mindset of those in the world who think it is impossible to rejoice as St. Paul did. We should be at peace in every difficult situation we face here, and we should not complain; rather, we should rejoice that God has given us an opportunity to suffer unjustly, as many great saints have suffered before us.

St. Basil also shares that those who complain against St. Paul say, “What good is it to spend the time, night and day, cheerful and merry in spiritual mind games? How can these be possible when we are surrounded by a multitude of unanticipated troubles that give the soul inevitable grief, whereby it is all the more impossible to rejoice and be cheerful? Should we be like one who is being roasted on a gridiron and perceives no pain, or goaded and feels no torment?”<sup>7</sup> To them, he responds by saying, “*A perfect soul, once it has been touched by the desire for its Creator, will rejoice here and now in a beauty, joy, and delight not shaken by the twists and turns of sinful desire. In fact, what causes others grief will only strengthen the joy of such a person.*”<sup>8</sup> He also says, “When with God, whether we are sitting in flames like the three young men in Babylon, locked up with lions, or swallowed by a sea monster, *we must nonetheless give praise, rejoicing and not mourning over the present, but be merry in the hope of what is to come. Equipped for holy combat, I must endure the assaults of the enemy in expectation of glory, looking forward to the immortal crown.*”<sup>9</sup> These words of St. Basil also speak very clearly to us since we also gave up the world in the hope of what is to come, and we too look forward to the immortal crown!

St. Basil also shares some practical advice about how to give thanks on a daily basis: “When you sit down for a meal, pray. As you take bread, thank the Giver... As you get dressed, thank Him for what He has given you. When you wrap your cloak around your shoulders, so increase your love for God, who has provided us with clothing suitable for winter and summer, to maintain our life and cover us modestly. Is the day at an end? So thank Him who gave us the sun by which we can perform our daily work, and fire to

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<sup>6</sup> 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), 99.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 97.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 99.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 100.

enlighten the night, and who has bestowed on us all the rest of life's needs. The night gives us other opportunities for prayer. Look up to the heavens and consider the beauty of the stars, and so give prayer to the Lord of visible things, and worship the Creator of all, who has made all by his wisdom. When you see living creatures dropping off to sleep, so again worship him, who cuts short our labors by forcing us into sleep, thus providing us with new strength through a brief rest.”<sup>10</sup>

He also gives instruction to monastics regarding prayer saying, “For prayer and psalmody, however, as also, indeed, for some other duties, every hour is suitable, that, while our hands are busy at their tasks, we may praise God sometimes with the tongue (when this is possible or, rather, when it is conducive to edification); or, if not, with the heart, at least, in psalms, hymns and spiritual canticles, as it is written. Thus, in the midst of our work can we fulfill the duty of prayer, giving thanks to Him who has granted strength to our hands for performing our tasks and cleverness to our minds for acquiring knowledge, and for having provided the materials, both that which is in the instruments we use and that which forms the matter of the arts in which we may be engaged, praying that the work of our hands may be directed toward its goal, the good pleasure of God. Thus we acquire a recollected spirit—when in every action we beg from God the success of our labors and satisfy our debt of gratitude to Him who gave us the power to do the work, and when, as has been said, we keep before our minds the aim of pleasing Him. If this is not the case, how can there be consistency in the words of the Apostle bidding us to ‘pray without ceasing.’”<sup>11</sup>

“So now, let each consider the teaching with your own reason, and you will appreciate the power of the apostolic command, and how it is both possible and useful: how you may indeed rejoice always, how you may pray without ceasing, how you may give thanks in all things. I think that you will see that this is indeed a consolation to the sorrowful, that through these words we may be made complete and perfect with the help of the Holy Spirit and the indwelling grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be glory and might, forever and ever. Amen.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> 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), 112–113.

<sup>11</sup> Basil of Caesarea, *Saint Basil: Ascetical Works*, ed. Roy Joseph Deferrari, trans. M. Monica Wagner, vol. 9, *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1962), 308.

<sup>12</sup> 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), 122.