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ΠΙΜΟΝΑΧΟΣ

A monthly newsletter with monastic issues for today's youth

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MY FIRST STEPS TOWARDS MONASTICISM



The idea of monasticism started in my heart in my early youth and I wrote poems about it when I was a college student since 1945. Back then, there were three points occupying my heart and my mind, these points were as follows:

Firstly I was very moved by the verse: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind." (Matt. 22:37) I asked myself. How practically can a man living in the world give God all his heart and all his mind? How easily could he be tempted by the love of the world and occupied by the love of relatives or himself when "The world is passing away and the love of it, but he who does the will of God abides forever." (John 2:15-17) How can he give God all his mind when the world has many things that he needs to think about and that could keep him busy and away from God.

The second point I thought about was eternity. Thinking seriously about eternity made me feel that life is just a passing time that we spend as strangers in this world. In fact, the word "*pilgrim*" and "*Stranger*" appeared a lot in my poems; as an example:

*As a stranger have I lived in the world
A pilgrim like my fathers.*

The third point I thought about was freedom. The world has a lot of restraints through work, time, family and responsibilities; but I found in monasticism a life of complete freedom and illumination.

BY: H.H. Pope Shenouda III



Monastic Life

If you wish peace and concord with others, you must learn to break your will in many things. To live in monasteries or religious communities, to remain there without complaint, and to persevere faithfully till death is no small matter. Blessed indeed is he who there lives a good life and there ends his days in happiness. If you would persevere in seeking perfection, you must consider yourself a pilgrim, an exile on earth. If you would become a religious person, you must be content to seem a fool for the sake of Christ. Habit and tonsure change a man but little; it is the change of life, the complete mortification of passions that endow a true religious.

He who seeks anything but God alone and the salvation of his soul will find only trouble and grief, and he who does not try to become the least, the servant of all, cannot remain at peace for long. You have come to serve, not to rule. You must understand, too, that you have been called to suffer and to work, not to be idle and gossip away your time. Here men are tried as gold in a furnace. Here no man can remain unless he desires with all his heart to humble himself before God.

Consider the lively examples set us by the saints, who possessed the light of true perfection and religion, and you will see how little, how nearly nothing, we do. What, alas, is our life, compared with theirs? The saints and friends of Christ served the Lord in hunger and thirst, in cold and nakedness, in work and fatigue, in vigils and fasts, in prayers and holy meditations, in persecutions and many afflictions. How many and severe were the trials they suffered the Apostles, martyrs, confessors, virgins, and all the rest who willed to follow in the footsteps of Christ! They hated their lives on earth, that they might have life in eternity.

How strict and detached were the lives the holy hermits led in the desert! What long and grave temptations they suffered! How often were they beset by the enemy! What frequent and ardent prayers they offered to God! What rigorous fasts they observed! How great their zeal and their love for spiritual perfection! How brave the fight they waged to master their evil habits! What pure and straightforward purpose they showed toward God! By day they laboured and by night they spent themselves in long prayers. Even at work they did not cease from mental prayer. They used all their time profitably; every hour seemed too short for serving God, and in the great sweetness of contemplation, they forgot even their bodily needs.

They renounced all riches, dignities, honours, friends, and associates. They desired nothing of the world. They scarcely allowed themselves the necessities of life, and the service of the body, even when necessary, was irksome to them. They were poor in earthly things but rich in grace and virtue. Outwardly destitute, inwardly they were full of grace and divine consolation. Strangers to the world, they were close and intimate friends of God. To themselves they seemed as nothing, and they were despised by the world, but in the eyes of God they were precious and beloved. They lived in true humility and simple obedience; they walked in charity and patience, making progress daily on the pathway of spiritual life, and obtaining great favour with God.



They were given as an example for all religious, and their power to stimulate us to perfection ought to be greater than that of the lukewarm to tempt us to laxity. How great was the fervour of all religious in the beginning of their holy institution! HOW great their devotion in prayer and their rivalry for virtue! What splendid discipline flourished among them! What great reverence and obedience in all things under the rule of a superior! The footsteps they left behind still bear witness that they indeed were holy and perfect men who fought bravely and conquered the world.

Today, he who is not a transgressor and who can bear patiently the duties which he has taken upon himself is considered great. How lukewarm and negligent we are! We lose our original fervour very quickly and we even become weary of life from laziness! Do not you, who have seen so many examples of the devout, fall asleep in the pursuit of virtue!

By: Thomas a Kempis

The Imitation of Christ



H.H. Pope Shenouda, Fr Daniel Al-Antouny, and Fr Anthony St Shenouda at the Papal residence at St Bishoy's Monastery after the consecration prayers (22nd September 2006)



After the Holy Liturgy of the 1 year celebration of Fr Anthony St Shenouda as a monk at St Shenouda Monastery (22nd September 2007)

Monastery News:

We Would like to wish everyone a very happy Coptic New Year and may the prayers of all the Martyrs be with us all amen.

On Saturday the 22nd of September all the fathers of the Monastery prayed a liturgy in commemoration of the first year of the consecration of Fr Anthony St Shenouda into the heavenly ranks of monkhood.



Detachment in Monasticism

*“But his wife looked back behind him,
And she became a pillar of salt”
(Gen 19:26)*

Monasticism has often been referred to as the heart of Christianity. This vocation mysteriously draws thousands of young men and women to an austere desert, living a tradition of Christianity that extends back to St. Anthony and the ancient desert fathers. Monasticism reveals to the world a way of life saturated in prayer and silence that functions as it always has to awaken hearts to the mercy and power of God.

The way of the monastic is the way of detachment. Their vows of obedience, poverty, and celibacy are all mere expressions of a life seeking attachment to their Christ via detachment to the world.

For those called to the monastic life, this detachment is total: a monk leaves his family, his possessions, his cares, even his own life in order to embrace the Kingdom. However, what can this total life of detachment teach us who are called to live in the world? How is it that you can live in a world and not be attached to it? How can we focus our life on Christ and His Kingdom, when we are compelled to focus on our families, careers, and the worries of this world?

St. John of the ladder offers us a simple solution, “hold all things with an open hand”. We must be willing to part with the “things” of this world whenever we are asked for them. If we find our hearts unwilling to part with anything, then there is improper attachment. If we find our minds being consumed by anything material, then there is improper attachment. If we find we get envious and jealous of our neighbours, then there is improper attachment. If we find ourselves being disturbed by the loss of material “things”, then there is improper attachment. In short, whenever we want to do anything just to bring pleasure to ourselves, then there is improper attachment.

What is all this for? You may be asking. Basically, when we learn what to let go of, we also learn what it is that is worth holding on to. Abba Zosimas rightly observed that “... *We become attached to useless, insignificant and entirely worthless matters, substituting these for the love of God and neighbour...*” Think of it this way: it is simply not possible to hold a lover's hand, when we keep our fists clenched, holding tightly onto something. In this same way, we cannot fully walk hand in hand with our Lover – Christ, until we let go of everything else.

In the gospels we are introduced to a rich young man who resembles our life in many ways. He had a strong desire - like many of us, for the heavenly Kingdom, so much so, that he questioned Jesus as to the requirements to enter eternal life. Jesus' initial re-



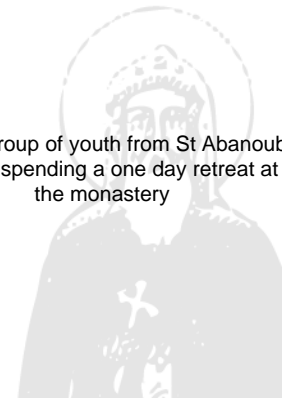
response brought him a great sense of security and satisfaction. Jesus told him that he was required to follow the commandments; to which the rich young man responded with confident affirmation “All these things I have kept from my youth”. However, Jesus’ second response was to send him away sorrowful - “...Go sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me”. It was the only thing that he lacked – detachment! He was too attached to his many possessions that sent him away sorrowful. These were the same words that drove our great father St. Anthony to the desert, these are the same words to which you and I are called to. Will we walk away sorrowful with the rich un-named young man? Or will we accept joyfully with the rich great St. Anthony?

May we humbly and honestly respond to the call of detachment to the cares of this temporary world so that we may be attached to the Glory of the world to come. I will leave you with words of St. John of the ladder on this topic: “Let those who run the race imitate not Lot’s wife, but Lot himself, and flee.

By: One of the Youth



Left: A group of youth from St Abanoub Church spending a one day retreat at the monastery



Right: A group of St Mark’s Preservants spending a one day retreat at the monastery





firm assurance of the surpassing glory of our vow.

It is worth investigating why those who live in the world and spend their life in vigils, fasts, labours and hardships, when they withdraw from the world and begin the monastic life, as if at some trial or on the practicing ground, no longer continue the discipline of their former spurious and sham asceticism. I have seen how in the world they planted many different plants of the virtues, which were watered by vainglory as by an underground sewage pipe, and were hoed by ostentation (*showiness*), and for manure were heaped with praise. But when transplanted to a desert soil, inaccessible to people of the world and so not manured with the foul-smelling water of vanity, they withered at once. For water loving plants are not such as to produce fruit in hard and arid training fields.

The man who has come to hate the world has escaped sorrow. But he who has an attachment to anything visible is not yet delivered from grief. For how is it possible not to be sad at the loss of something we love? We need to have great vigilance in all things but we must give our whole attention to this above everything else.

After our renunciation, when the demons inflame our hearts by reminding us of our parents and brethren, then let us arm ourselves against them with prayer, and let us inflame our-selves with the remembrance of the eternal fire, so that by reminding our-selves of this, we may quench the untimely fire of our heart.

If anyone thinks he is without detachment to some object, but is grieved at its loss, then he is completely deceiving himself.

If young people who are prone to the desires of physical love and to luxurious ways wish to enter the monastic life, let them exercise themselves in all sobriety and prayer, and persuade themselves to abstain from all luxury and guile, lest their last state be worse than the first.' This harbor provides safety, but also exposes one to danger. Those who sail the spiritual seas know this. But it is a pitiful sight to behold those who have survived perils at sea suffering shipwreck in harbor.

By: St John Climacus
The Ladder of Divine Ascent

Special Thanks:

We would like to extend a special thanks to all those who contributed in publishing this newsletter, especially Mr Alfred Athanasius for his design of the artwork and Mr Gamal Abadir for printing this newsletter. We would like to also thank all the youth who kindly write the youth articles. We pray that God may reward you all in the heavenly Jerusalem.



Questions & Answers

I want to lead a life of monasticism but I am very attached to my family

The major problem for a person who wants to become a monk is how to present his idea to his family, and how he will tolerate living apart from each other. While it is beautiful to love your family and to be loved by them in return, if you have an intention for monasticism, "God should be obeyed more than people." Christ's love should come before any other love. *"He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me."* (Matthew 10:37). Parents prevent their children from going to the monastery by using the excuse that they are unable to tolerate being separated from them, while they let them go to other countries for study or work.

In this respect, they can bear the separation if the motive is to get rich, but they are unable to bear it if it has to do with entering the monastery. Others who get married to a partner from overseas, I wonder if this wife, for the love of her husband, has left her country, her family and friends and all that she had to come with her husband and live in a completely different and at times, strange atmosphere. She is able to tolerate separation from her family because she loves her husband, while we are unable to sacrifice, for the sake of the groom and beloved Lord Jesus, for our eternal salvation. Truly, the Lord says: *"So the master commended the unjust steward because he had dealt shrewdly. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in their generation than the sons of light."* (Luke 16:8). The parental love, which forbids a person from God's love and consecration, fulfills the verse: *"and a man's enemies will be those of his own household."* (Matthew 10:36).



Further Readings:

Benedicta Ward, "***The Sayings of the Desert Fathers***", Cistercian Publications.



The fourth century ascetic flight to the desert indelibly marked Christianity. The faithful who did not embrace the austerity of the desert admired those who did and sought them out for counsel and consolation. The words the monks were collected and passed around among those too far away or too feeble to make the trek themselves or lived generations later. Previously available only in fragments, these Sayings of the Desert Fathers are now accessible in its entirety in English for the first time.

St John Climacus, "***The Ladder of Divine Ascent***" Holy Transfiguration Monastery.



This book is a collection of observations of a veteran of many wars, of a struggler in God and victorious ascetic who himself mounted the ladder of Jacob, reached the summit, being propelled by the love of God, and the love of his neighbour, he left behind him the Ladder of Divine Ascent.