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ΠΙΜΟΝΑΧΟΣ

A monthly newsletter with monastic issues for today's youth

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Apparent bodily virtues

By: H.H. Pope Shenouda III



The evil one can sometimes entice a person with the apparent bodily virtues, instead of hidden spiritual virtues. The word "apparent" here means those virtues apparent only to the person himself, or other people but not to God. By such virtues he (*the Devil*) may lead him to self-admiration and vanity or to disdaining others who have not attained the same level.

This war is directed at monks as well as to the laity. When a monk begins his struggle, the devil makes him concerned with fasting, kneeling down in worship, watchfulness, silence and seclusion which are all apparent practices. At the same time he neglects the virtues within the heart such as joy, peace, purity, meekness, calmness ... etc.

During a fast, the devil fights on the bodily level and neglects the spiritual. He makes a person's whole concern the time of abstaining and its length, the kind of food to be eaten and the necessity of abstaining from some delicious foods, decreasing the quantity of water one drinks, which are all bodily matters. He makes him completely neglect the spiritual virtues of fasting such as penitence, elevation of spirit and self control against all matters. The devil knows that such fasting of the body may not benefit the person spiritually, but he makes use of this point afterwards to prevent the person from fasting completely.

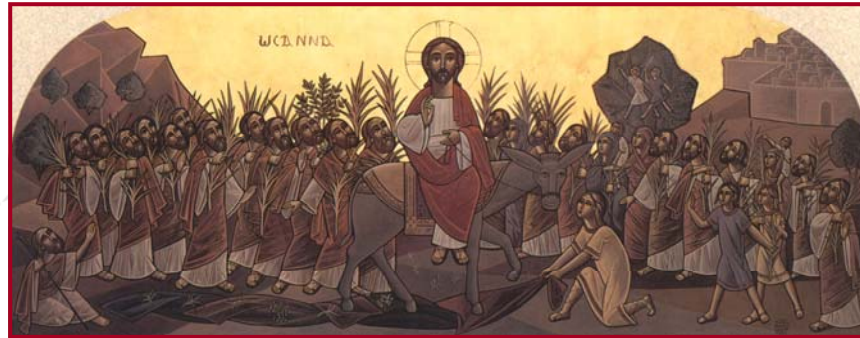
The same takes place in respect of kneeling down in worship (metanias). What concerns him is increasing the number of metanias. He never makes the person think that when he kneels down, his soul cleaves to the dust (Ps. 119:25) as does his head. He makes him neglect the spiritual emotions and prayers that accompany kneeling down... He only wants to make these metanias, in spite of their abundance, turn into a bodily practice which may exert him but give him no benefit. This may lead him to vain glory!

In the same way a person may be satisfied with virginity. A person may think that virginity is that apparent act which is non marriage, while his soul may not be chaste and his thoughts defiled. The positive



element of virginity is directing all love to God; if this does not exist, it means that the person has the outer appearance of virginity and not its spirit and effectiveness in the heart.

Our main concern is supposed to be directed towards the inner spiritual act because it is the most important. The Lord has said, "My son, give me your heart." (Prov 23:26). So, a person should begin with the purity of heart, God's love, and inner virtues. From the pure heart comes holy prayers, kneeling down in holy worship, spiritual fasting and every other virtue. It is surprising how often he who cares for apparent virtues disagrees with his confession father and may think of seeking another



Stories from the Desert Fathers

Some brothers from a monastery went to the desert to visit an anchorite who received them with joy. According to the custom amongst hermits, when he saw their fatigue, he set the table before the usual time and brought what he had to refresh them. When evening came, they recited the twelve Psalms, and likewise during the night. While he was keeping vigil all alone, he heard them saying amongst themselves, "The anchorites in the desert have a softer life than we do in the monastery". At early dawn while they were preparing to leave and to visit the neighbouring old man, he said to them, "Greet him for me and say to him, 'Do not water the vegetables'." This they did. When he heard these words, the other old man understood what it meant, and he kept them at work until evening. When evening came, he recited the great *synaxis* and said, "Let us stop now, for your sakes, for you are tired", and he went on, "it is not our custom to eat every day, but for your sakes let us eat a little." He brought them dry bread and salt saying, "For your sake we must celebrate", and he poured a little vinegar on the salt. When they rose from table, they said the *synaxis* till early dawn. Then he said to them, "We cannot fulfil the whole rule on your account; you must take a little rest, for you come from far." When morning came, they wanted to escape, but he begged them saying, "Stay yet awhile with us, at least three days according to the commandment, so as to follow the traditional custom of the desert." But seeing that he would not send them away, they arose and escaped secretly.



Abba Benjamin once said: "When we returned to Sketis after the harvest, they brought us a little agricultural produce from Alexandria measure of olive oil in vessels sealed up with plaster. The following summer, each of the brothers brought his vessel to the Church with the oil that he had left over. I brought my own vessel, which I had not opened, but which, after making a small hole in it with a needle, I had only tasted; indeed, my heart experienced great joy, supposing that I had achieved something great. But when all of the vessels were gathered together, those of the brothers were found to be completely intact, with the plaster just as it was when the vessels were first given to them, whereas mine had a hole in it. This caused me as much embarrassment as if I had committed fornication."



Left: H.G. Bishop Elia During his visit to the monastery.



Right: Fr Stephanous Al- Antouny with the new priest

Abba Achillas once visited Abba Isaiah and found him eating; he had put salt and water on his plate, which he hid behind some plaited palm branches when he noticed Abba Achillas coming towards him. As later events proved, he did this avoid scandalizing his visitor, for such a custom did not prevail in Sketis.

Now, when Abba Achillas found him eating, without there being anything in front of him, he asked him: "Tell me, what were you eating?" "Forgive me," replied Abba Isaiah, "I was cutting palm branches in the heat, and when I came to eat, I put bread with salt into my mouth; but the bread did not go down, because my throat was parched from the heat. For this reason, I was compelled to put water on the salt, so as to satisfy my need for sustenance; but forgive me." Abba Achillas then said: "Come and see Isaiah eating soup in Sketis; if you want to eat soup, go to Egypt."



Is it Syami?

By: One of the Youth

*"The true fast is that in which sins, anger,
tongue, and instincts are under control"*
(St Basil the Great)

During these most holy days of Lent, one of the most common questions asked when deciding what to purchase from the supermarket is: "is it syami (is it fasting)? You quickly turn the item around and start to read the ingredients to ensure that the product does not contain any animal products. Every now and then you get really excited when you discover a product that is enjoyable to eat and still conforms to the requirements of the Coptic Orthodox fast (just like the day when I discovered Oreos were syami!).

The question: "is it syami?" stems from the desire to offer to God an acceptable and honourable fast. As soon as milk solids is read out on the list of ingredients, the item is immediately returned to its rightful place on the shelf. After purchasing all our syami products, we proceed to the checkout with our conscience at ease that we are fulfilling our desire to offer God an acceptable and honourable fast. But are we really? Is this all that is required? Let us look at the how the Lord explained the acceptable fast to the Prophet Isaiah:

"Would you call this a fast, And an acceptable day to the Lord? Is this not the fast that I have chosen: To loose the bonds of wickedness, To undo the heavy burdens, To let the oppressed go free, And that you break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter" (Is 58:4-7).

Upon reading the lives of our saintly desert fathers, you will quickly notice two very common trends, they all lived their lives in the quest for spiritual perfection and they practiced extreme forms of physical asceticism. I believe these two simple observations, shed light on the perspective and purpose of fasting. One is the aim, and the other is the means. Although, this may seem to be obvious, we often lose perspective forgetting the aim (spiritual perfection) while aiming at the means (fasting).

St. John Chrysostom explains it as follows:

"Do you fast? Give me proof of it by your works.

If you see a poor man, take pity on him.

If you see a friend being honoured, do not envy him.

Do not let only your mouth fast, but also the eye and the ear and the feet and the hands and all the members of our bodies.

Let the hands fast, by being free of greed.

Let the feet fast, by ceasing to run after sin.

Let the eyes fast, by disciplining them not to glare at that which is sinful.

Let the ear fast, by not listening to evil talk and gossip.

Let the mouth fast from foul words and unjust criticism.

For what good is it if we abstain from birds and fishes, but bite and devour our brothers?"



So if we would like to offer an acceptable fast to the Lord, let us not only offer the fasting of food, but moreover the fasting of the soul, as **John Cassian** teaches us saying: *"We should not be confident that the outside fasting of food is enough alone for the purity of the heart and body, unless it is accompanied by the fasting of the soul."*

"Is it syami?" Let us not only ask ourselves this question before deciding what food to purchase, but let us ask this question before we refuse a brother a helping hand, let us ask this question before passing judgment on another, let us ask this question before gazing our eyes on a lustful scene, let us ask this question before losing our temper, let us ask this question before deciding not to pray at night and let us ask this question before every action and reaction we may take.



From the Life of St. Anthony

St. Anthony the Great, when he thought about eating or sleeping, as well as the other bodily necessities, experienced an uneasiness, for his thoughts were centered on the spiritual nature of the soul. So it was that many times, when he happened to be eating with a group of other monks, bringing to mind spiritual food, he would take his leave and distance himself from them, thinking that he might be embarrassed if they were to see him eating.

Of course, in private he ate what his body demanded; though he also often ate with the brothers. And while he was made uneasy thereby, he nonetheless unconstrained addressed to them words of spiritual benefit. Among other things, he told them that "one must give all of his care to the soul, rather than the body. Let us set aside a little time for the body, so as to satisfy its natural needs, but dedicate the whole of our time to the soul and to seeking what is beneficial to it, so that we are not distracted by the enjoyments of the body, but that the soul might use the body as its servant. For this is the meaning of the words of the Saviour: "Therefore, take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink?... (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knows that you have need of all these things. ...But seek first the kingdom of God...; and all of these things shall be added unto you" (St. Matthew 6:31-34)."



Ascetism and Fasting

By: Abba Mark
From the Evergetinos

Those living the ascetic life, when they begin their ascetic labors, must be able to bring them to fruition; thus, both those young and old who have a strong body, and do not fear hardship, should eagerly undertake the most useful and advantageous kind of fasting. They should carefully weigh how much bread they eat and should drink moderate amounts of water at sparse intervals, so that they may depart from their meals without having completely consumed all of their food and water, not having been impeded by the pleasure of the stomach in carrying out their duties to God. If we desire to take our fill of food, soon we will be lax in our attentiveness and will turn to some other desire; and should we also satisfy that desire, then we will abandon it, too, like the first. Indeed, it is impossible to remain satiated when, in order to satisfy ourselves, we fulfill whatever desire we have.

What food is sweeter and more exquisite than manna? Yet, when Israel ate from this and was filled, even though it could want nothing better, it brought to mind what was inferior: that is, onions and garlic. Within abundance, there dwell new desires. So, if, by taking our fill of bread, we want yet other things, let us then not eat it to satiation, lest we still be hungry and need more to eat to be filled; in this way, we will avoid the harm brought on by our desires and will find benefit from the virtue of restraint.

But perhaps some from among such individuals, who are not greatly inclined towards fasting, will say: "Could it be that it is a sin for a man to eat?" But even we do not advise that one refrain from food because it is a sin, but because food sometimes accompanies sin. And Israel did not sin by desiring food, but showed impiety by virtue of complaining against God. That is, the Jews said: "Can God furnish a table in the wilderness?" (Psalm 78: 17-21). And having prepared a table for them, the wrath of God was then raised up against them and their mighty were slain, so that they should not again seek and desire other food and blaspheme against the Most High, in this way bringing destruction upon their offspring (Numbers 11:1-35). It is difficult for one to bridle a gluttonous belly; for it becomes a god to those who are conquered by it, and one who cannot put up with it can not be saved.

Danger lies, however, not only in satiation, but also in exhaustion; for when we spend too many days completely without food, then exhaustion and depression will have reason to rise up and war against us. And our nightly vigils, on the one hand, will lead sleep, while our daytime prayer will lead us into lustful thoughts, with the result that our sleep will be of no benefit at all, and we will be very greatly harmed by these lustful thoughts. For we will begin to take pride that we have subjected ourselves to greater asceticism than others and to disdain the lesser, which is the greatest of all other errors. That is, just as a farmer, though he may spend a great deal of money to cultivate his fields, if he does not plant seeds in them, will come to ruin, so it is with us; if we subdue our flesh attentively, but do not capture within our souls the blessing of prayer, so that we pray unceasingly, we will work against ourselves.



Now, however, someone may say: "Where there is prayer or, in general, virtue, is there a need for fasting?" Of course, there is the greatest need. That is to say, precisely as a poor farmer, if he seeds a bare field without first cultivating it, will reap thistle instead of wheat at harvest time, so it is with us; if we do not exhaust our flesh with fasting, we cannot bring to fruition the words of prayer in our hearts, wherefore we will harvest sin instead of virtue. For this flesh comes from that earth; if we do not then show to the flesh the same care that we show to the earth, the fruit of virtue will never germinate.

We say all of this, not to impede those who may benefit from fasting, but to counsel those who do not wish to come to harm. For just as he who undertakes fasting with foresight derives benefit, so, on the contrary, one who is not prudent in its application comes to ruin. Thus, those who are interested in being benefited would do well to protect themselves against such harm that is, the vainglory which it can create. The bread which we eat in the course of fasting, which we apportion for ourselves, let us distribute throughout our fast days, so that we eat a little daily. In this way, we will bind our fleshly mind and have our hearts fixed on prayer, which will better aid to safeguard us, by the power of God, from boasting and to pass all of our days in humility, without which no one can please God.



Left: Fr Joseph Sim, Fr Youstos Wassef, and Fr Luke Melik Spending their 40 days in the monastery, to learn the Rites of the Holy Liturgy



Right: Fr Arsanius Barsoum and some deacons praying the Liturgy with the new Fathers



Question & Answer

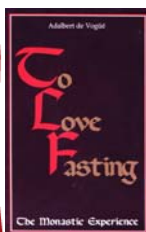
When the desert fathers are speaking of subduing the body or the passions, through detachment and fasting, do they teach us to hate our bodies?

It appears that the desert treats the body harshly; but in fact, the emphasis is on shedding the excess layers, on getting rid of the dead layers, which they define as “flesh. Detachment is a way of renouncing excess baggage and of travelling light. And the truth is that we can always manage with less than we have; indeed, we can often manage with a lot less than we would dare to imagine. Even though claiming that the entire world belongs to God, the desert elders strive no longer to depend on material possessions. Their struggle is not to become centered on the world; it is to establish another order and focus, where the entire world is centered on God.

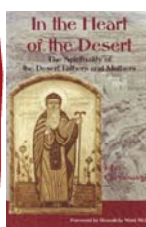
The ascetic’s treatment of the body appears negative to us because we have overloaded the body with far too much. The change, therefore, as we move from our lifestyle to saint Antony’s, seems so overwhelming and enormous that it creates a sense of unbalance within us. Our bodies go through “withdrawal symptoms” when confronted with the radical withdrawal of saint Antony into the desert. Our culture teaches us that the more we have, the better we are; saint Antony thought us that the less he had, the more he was! We are carrying so much baggage, so many preoccupations and concerns, such great loads makes walking freely with God looks frightening, unfamiliar and painful. And our natural response is to resist change; it simply seems crazy to us.



Fr Adalbert de Vogue, **“To Love Fasting The Monastic Experience”** Saint Bede’s Publication.



Fasting, although a fundamental practice for religious and spiritual life, has practically vanished from modern western Christianity. It is said that moderns cannot fast as the ancients did. Is this true? Adalbert de Vogue, a Benedictine monk, decided to try the old schedule for meals given by St. Benedict in his Rule. To his surprise, he found it was easy and pleasant to eat only once, at the end of the day. This simple fast is not only compatible with work, but favourable to every activity, generating physical well-being and spiritual joy, bringing health to body and soul.



Rev. Dr. John Chryssavgis, **“In the Heart of the Desert”**, World Wisdom

A beautiful and sensitive account of the lives and spirituality of the early Christian desert monastics. Chryssavgis' treatment of these strange, compelling figures is marked by an uncommon depth of understanding; under his discerning gaze, the world of the desert monastics comes alive for the reader. What really distinguishes his treatment, though, is his compassion for these ancient figures, his ability to meet them as fellow human beings who, like us, find themselves caught up in a mysterious and challenging spiritual journey.