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**SPIRITUAL FRUIT**

**FIVE NOVICES DRESSED IN GREY**

**ON THE FEAST OF ST. DEMIANA**

May 20, 1995

*In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, One God. Amen.*

 Behind each one of these novices, there is a great story of struggle; it is not easy for a person to leave the world and come to monasticism. It is a struggle within oneself to take this angelic path and be certain of one’s intention to walk down this path. It is a struggle with the family, a struggle to leave one’s occupation and responsibilities (perhaps church commitments), and sometimes a struggle with the confession father until he is convinced of the sincerity of the call, is reassured, and finally agrees. This needs many prayers. Sometimes circumstances arrange for a person to be born into an unorthodox family, a Catholic family for example, but she has loved orthodoxy since her childhood. She faces a struggle for Orthodox baptism, a struggle for Orthodox education in the seminary, and a struggle to leave the Catholic family and come to an Orthodox monastery. There are various stories of struggle, how each one left the world and chose the path of monasticism. Perhaps it took many years and countless prayers: she prayed one year in order for her confession father to be convinced; she prayed another year for her mother to be convinced; and after her mother is convinced and she comes to the monastery, her father is not convinced, so she returns home for another year until he is convinced and agrees for her to come. It is not easy for a person to leave the world. This is why it is very joyous and beautiful for us to present to St. Demiana, on her feast day, five of her daughters who struggled so intensely to live in this place, to produce blessed spiritual fruit distant from the offenses and hardships of the world.

 In this monastery, we also have some nuns who entered monasteries, left for consecration, and later reentered the monastery – finally reaching monasticism; they encountered many hardships. Perhaps some of them had a desire to fulfill particular longings, having a specific vision for their monastic life. The important thing is that we are delighted with this “Consecration of Life for Monasticism” – these five are offering their lives to consecration for monasticism, as a prelude to monasticism thereafter at God’s appointed time to officially dress them in the monastic habit. Now, the sun is just fully setting, or about to set.

**Why You Left All:**

 After all this labor, what is their obligation? Each one must take into consideration the value of the long journey she took to arrive at the monastery doorstep, and the value of choosing this path, in order to produce spiritual fruit that would delight God’s heart. This truly underscores the words of St. Paul: “*The hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother*.” [[1]](#footnote-2) Living in the monastery, ask yourself this truth: “Why did I leave the world and come to the monastery? Why did I crush my mother’s heart and tear apart my father’s heart?” Is it to run and play in the monastery, or is it to produce spiritual fruit in this place? Each time you have a thought of becoming lax or lenient in your spiritual life inside the monastery, you need to remember that you slighted all people, left your family, and did not care to look after them in order to produce fruit on God’s path. If they told you, “Your mother needs you,” you answered, “But I need to be a bride for Christ, and this is more important than my mother.” If they said, “Your father is better off with your services,” you answered, “God will take care of him, but I want to be dedicated to my heavenly Father” – there are very powerful responses against the family when they try to hinder a person’s way. They might say, “We want to rejoice in seeing you married,” but you answered, “No, but I cannot give you this joy here in the world, rejoice in me in the Kingdom.” Yet, if they could neither rejoice in us in the world, nor in the Kingdom, how then could we face them? This is why, in the monastery, a person must produce spiritual fruit that would delight God’s heart. No one forced you to take the monastic path. You chose it. Therefore, you must live a life that transcends high above the world.

 This is why it would greatly upset me if I hear someone saying, “My spiritual life before monasticism was stronger.” If this happens, then the simple response would be, “Why did you leave the world?” Are you incapable of answering? If your spiritual life was stronger in the world, then it would have been better for you not to have entered monasticism. You fled the world with all its preoccupations, evils, concerns, and offenses in order to live a pure life – to live the perfection of fulfilling God’s commandment. You were distressed that the world was hindering you from fulfilling the Biblical commandments in a way that would assure you concerning your eternity and your soul’s salvation. You wanted to ascend to the perfection of fulfilling the commandment, wanting nothing to hinder your spiritual growth, nothing to carve into God’s love in your heart. Yet, you might have come to the monastery and become distracted by objects that you also feel compete with God’s love: perhaps a duty, a certain honor you seek to reach, a certain personality in the monastery whose attention you became preoccupied with. You had your mother at home doting over you and attending to you. She was better off, so why would you now want to take up someone’s attention or care? Do you want to take attention or praise from them? It is good for a person to pursue everyone’s blessings and bless everyone[[2]](#footnote-3) by maintaining good relations with everyone, comforting those around you, serving with love, and being the image of meekness, obedience, and peace; this is not what I mean. I mean it is not right when a person’s heart is preoccupied with objects to the point that they could distract you from God. God must be the main and only goal in your life, and thereafter, you could treat people with love and respect, thereby winning each person’s love; there are no contradictions. In this way, your blessing will rest upon everyone; and everyone will bless you.

 In all your duties in the monastery you must examine yourself: “What have we done that is as God wills, and what have we left undone of that which He does not will?”[[3]](#footnote-4) Are we walking along the spiritual path, or has a certain current begun to sweep us along. You could be carried away by the gossip-current, grow accustomed to it, and then find yourself unable to stop. We fled from the world to avoid people and be consecrated toward prayer. Now, is gossip a secular or a monastic occupation? You are monastics. We fled from the world because in the world the women sit around gossiping about each other. In the monastic life, if we sit around gossiping about each other, then what have we gained?

**Life of Exile:**

 This is why one of the most important principles of monasticism is the life of exile. St. Barsanuphius says, “We are strangers brethren; therefore, let us be complete strangers.”[[4]](#footnote-5) The exiled person is not one who frowns in people’s faces (assuming this as the life of exile); the exiled person lives among people, drowning them with love, while the heart clings to loving the Lord Christ. This person lives among others and gives them much love, but the heart and mind are occupied with Christ; this is what causes successful exile. Gossiping certainly is not one of the qualifications for the life of exile, and neither is the love of honor.

 A person who dies to the world is neither distressed over the love of praise and honor, nor agitated by being dishonored or disrespected. If one proceeds to insult the dead, they will neither respond nor be upset, and even if one praises them, they will not rejoice.[[5]](#footnote-6) One is dead internally. The true monastic is one to whom praise and disrespect are equal; if you see a monastic to whom it makes no difference whether praised or disrespected, know that this one has begun to walk correctly on the monastic path.

**Examine Yourself:**

 If you want to conduct a self-experiment, each one of you (regardless if you are a novice or a nun) test yourself: the one to whom being either insulted or praised makes no difference has placed her foot on the true path to monasticism, otherwise, tell yourself, “You have a long way to go. You have not yet become a monk.”[[6]](#footnote-7) External behavior is not the issue; one might not respond, but then gnaw within herself inside the cell. The most important point is that, internally, it does not matter. This is what happened with St. Moses the Black when he told himself, “They have acted rightly concerning you, for your skin is as black as ashes.”[[7]](#footnote-8) I am sure you are aware of a higher spiritual level: to rejoice at being disrespected and mourn at being praised. There is an even higher level, one actually craves disdain, not only rejoicing if it comes, but awaiting it and hoping for it, and becoming sad if it does not come. A yet even higher level is to go beg for disdain,[[8]](#footnote-9) not so that they say that you are a saint; such a one goes looking for reasons to occasion disdain and rejoices to find it without hoping for praise for this behavior. Therefore, if we are still upset by disdain, and rejoice at praise, then, what level have we attained? As for the one who not only is upset by disdain, but rather is angered by it, this one is at an even lower level – below zero.

 What can we say now to the five who we have just dressed in grey? Place before you these standards, and after some time, tell me what you have done. Always ask yourself, am I moving forward on the path of lowliness, or am I moving backwards? Did I come to the monastery being a person who is unaffected by praise or disdain, and after a while I became hypersensitive, and the issue of honor within the monastery started to bother me? You might have served in Sunday School, and were not affected if someone abused you, but now you protest, “How can they do this to me,” and wonder, “Where is that person of old who endured so much and used to be a pushover?”

 I do not mean that we should abuse people in order to teach them humility. It comes naturally; it manifests itself through circumstances. Yet, sometimes a person needs a specific experience, a speedy lesson; the fathers used such means. It was not feasible for them to send a person desiring monasticism back and forth from his home in order to test his persistence in monasticism, so they might have put him through harsh trials, but this was not the standard procedure; this was the exception. When the Pope treated St. Moses the Black this way, perhaps the Holy Spirit was leading him in order to reveal the humility inside St. Moses who had previously been a fierce thief and murderer. It was an event, not a standard; he did not continue treating St. Moses in this same manner, to the extent that St. Moses would come to think that the Pope is upset with him, or rejecting him, and the issue augments. This also differs from a situation in which a person is in need of a type of discipline (for some reason or other, perhaps there is a mistake that requires correction), lest this mistake continues uncorrected and grows roots – this also differs from my point. Nonetheless, St. Paul says, “*If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten*?”[[9]](#footnote-10)

 On this occasion, I would like to thank you all for your hard toil during St. Demiana’s Festival. Perhaps, you will need some time to recuperate. Hopefully, all those who are in need will take into consideration all their hard work; a respite, retreat, or some retreat days are possible for those who need it. I greatly appreciate your effort, and request your prayers for the monastery to provide continuous spiritual and architectural growth in order to venerate St. Demiana the martyr. The monastery exists in a time when each person here feels comfort and peace, in a loving, assuring atmosphere in which there is no fear or terror, but each person’s fear is directed toward her eternity and her soul’s salvation. If one lives in terror, she will not be able to produce fruit in her spiritual life. When you live in a place where you feel that the fear of God (and not human fear) permeates the air – this will lead you on in your spiritual life.

 We stopped at five, so that they could resemble the five wise virgins standing at the right hand of the Master, with the door open and luminous. Hopefully, in the near future we will dress the rest; the three remaining novices could be leaven for those who come thereafter.

*God willing we will see you rejoice at your monasticism.*

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1. (The New King James Version 1982), Philm 1:7. All Biblical References are from the New King James Version (NKJV), unless otherwise stated. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Saint Antony. Cf. (Beni-Suef Publication Committee 1977), 198; (Budge, The Paradise of the Holy Fathers 2008), Vol. II, 8 {19}. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Saint Nisterus (Ward, Sayings 1984), 155 {5}. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Saint Barsanuphius (Beni-Suef Publication Committee 1977), 160. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Saint Macarius Cf. (Ward, Sayings 1984), 132 {23}. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Saint Macarius, Ibid, 126 {2}. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Saint Moses, Ibid, 139 {4}. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Unknown Elder (Ward, Wisdom 1997), 55 {205}. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Heb 12:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)