

Sunday, January 29, 2012

A Coptic monastery in the US

In December of last year, 2011, It was a blessing for me to spend few days of retreat time at the Monastery of St. Mary and St. Moses the Black in Texas. It is the second established Coptic monastery in the US after the monastery of St Anthony in Bristow, California.

This monastery was established in 2005 under the direct supervision of H.G. Bishop Youssef, the Bishop of the Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States. Today, the monastery is home to more than ten monks and about ten novice brothers, they all live in a fellowship of love and precise monastic order of worship and vocation.

This monastery is located near the city of Corpus Christi, about two hours southeast of San Antonio, TX. It overlooks Lake Corpus Christi, a large reservoir, and has a beautiful scenic view. It has several buildings; some are old while others are recent construction, it also has several canopies spread all over the grounds to spend quite retreat time.

Spending time of retreat in monasteries and convents is an important and beneficial spiritual endeavor especially to those who lead a busy life at work or in school. Just as the body needs rest and recreational activities from hard work and a stressful life so is the soul, it also needs to be recharged, filled with peace, and nourished by praise and the word of God. Therefore, monasteries and convents provide a great opportunity for retreat to restore one's peace and to recharge spiritually.

The daily program in a retreat includes daily midnight praise and liturgy as well as the evening Agpeya prayers. There are also periods for individual retreat time for prayer, reading, and meditation as well as time for simple work chores. There is also a chance for small groups to assemble for bible study or to convene with some of the monks to seek their advice and spiritual experience.

In a retreat time, the soul becomes dismantled from the busyness of the world and its troubles, so we begin to face our own imperfections and faults and renew our vows of repentance with Christ, this is one of the most important objective of a spiritual retreat. The purity of the heart is an important goal for every Christian who seeks seeing God. This state of purity requires constant watchfulness and self-awareness as well as a continuous repentance.

Recurrent retreat times help us to purify our life more frequently. Consequently, they enable us to grow spiritually and to enjoy the mysteries of God.

Additionally, retreat times help us to know the will of God in our lives. When our soul become uninhabited, we would clearly hear the voice of God in our hearts, they also help us to strengthen our will in the spiritual journey. When we prolong prayer times, spiritual readings, and meditation times, then the Holy Spirit becomes fervent within us, and it strengthens our will to abide by the commandments of the Bible regardless of the sacrifice. This is what the Holy Bible encourages to do, *"In returning and rest you shall be saved; In quietness and confidence shall be your strength."* (Isaiah 30:15)

If the retreat time in a monastery or a convent is beneficial to all ages and all spiritual levels, it is particularly a big support to young men and women. When they practice it regularly, it shows a tremendous difference in their spiritual lives. It helps them to build a strong relationship with Christ and the Church; it strengthens them to face the wicked trends that they get exposed to in schools and work. Thus, it is essential to encourage our children to go to monastic retreats. We should also support them, to the best of our abilities, especially on travel expense which they may not be able to afford it on their own.

Having Coptic Monasteries in the US is a great blessing for the Church at large... Not only because it offers a powerful example for spiritual strife and dying to the world through the life of the monks, but also because it encourages spending times of retreat and worship in a spiritual environment that moves the heart towards God's love, and gives it immunity against the ailment of sin

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