



Monasticism in the 21st Century: A Viable Alternative or a Forgotten Ideal?

A brother went to see Abba Joseph and said to him, “Abba, as far as I can I say my prayer rule, I fast a little, I pray and meditate, I live in peace as far as I can, I purify my thoughts. What else can I do?” Then the old man stood up and stretched his hands towards heaven. His fingers became like ten lamps of fire and he said to him, “If you will, you can become all flame.”

This is what monasticism is: a longing for God that knows no limits. It is the beginning of the Age to come, of the Kingdom of Heaven still here on earth. The Church calls monasticism the Angelic Life. According to holy tradition, in the 4th century an angel appeared to St. Pachomius, the first of the monks struggling out in the Egyptian desert to establish a monastic community, and gave him a bronze tablet inscribed with a Rule for his monks to follow. From apostolic times to the present day thousands, hundreds of thousands, probably millions of people have left everything they had and scorned everything that this world has to offer in order to follow Christ and to live the Gospels more fully.

At times this impulse has been stronger, at times weaker, and the Holy Fathers speak of monasticism as a barometer of spiritual life in the Church. When monastic life flourishes, the faithful are really striving spiritually, and conversely, when few people find inspiration in the monastic ideal, monasteries diminish and are ignored, spiritual life amongst the faithful is on the decline. At the end of the 4th century, when persecution of Christians ceased and the Church knew peace for the first time, but the zeal of converts hadn't cooled and many Christians desired to give everything to Christ, monasticism even became a mass movement.

One of the travel writers of the period, St. Palladius, tells of his visit to “Oxyrhynchus, one of the cities of the Thebaid (in Egypt). It is impossible to do justice to the marvels which we saw there. For the city is so full of monasteries that the very walls resound with the voices of monks. Other monasteries encircle it outside... The temples and capitols of the city were bursting with monks; every quarter of the city was inhabited by them... The monks were almost in the majority over the secular inhabitants... and there is no hour of day or night when they do not offer acts of worship to God... What can one say of the piety of the... people, who when they saw us strangers.. approached us as if we were angels? How can one convey an adequate idea of the throngs of monks and nuns past counting? However, as far as we could ascertain from the holy bishop of that place, we would say that he had under his jurisdiction 10,000 monks and 20,000 nuns. It is beyond my power to describe their hospitality and their love for us. In fact each of us had our cloaks torn apart by people pulling us to make us go and stay with them.”

Closer to our own time, in Russia in 1907, towards the end of the spiritual revival of the 19th century and before the Revolution there were 24,000 monks and 66,000 nuns, about 90,000 monastics, living in 970 monasteries. On the bleak side, the countryside of France, where my monastery is, is peppered by empty monasteries in ruins, remnants of the Age of Faith, as historians call the Middle Ages. They are testimonies to the spiritual barrenness of France, where more people believe in astrology than in Christ, and people spit at me on the streets because they think I'm a Moslem. It would never occur to them that a woman wearing black might be a nun. The scene at the airport here in Ottawa when I arrived was nothing like the scene in Oxyrhynchus when St. Palladius walked through the gates, and you could probably travel clear across Canada or America and not see a single monastery nor meet a single monk or nun.



But is monasticism completely a lost cause today? True, to modern eyes, the monk is increasingly a figure of yesterday, someone silly and eccentric. People think of roly-poly Friar Tuck from Robin Hood or of the sinister, murderous monks in the novel “The Name of the Rose”. The word “nun” brings to mind Mother Theresa or silly movies about nice but rather dumb women wearing strange, uncomfortable clothes. Even in someone with a more Orthodox frame of mind the word “monastic” applied to our times calls up the image of St. John of Shanghai, of Fr. Seraphim Rose, or the New Martyr the Grand Duchess Elizabeth, and we wonder what can these saints possibly have in common with us? Is anything from their lives and experiences at all relevant or applicable, and how can we, Orthodox Christians of the 21 century, even dare to aspire to imitate them?



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The Sayings of the Desert Fathers and the lives of the founders of monasticism abound with dire warnings that monasticism, especially the strict asceticism of past centuries, will be just about impossible in the latter days. Once, when “the Holy Fathers were making predictions about the last generation, they said, “What have we ourselves done?” One of them, the great Abba Ischyrion replied, “We ourselves have fulfilled the commandments of God.” The others replied, “And those who come after us, what will they do?” He said, “They will struggle to achieve half our works.” They said, “And to those that come after them, what will happen?” He said, “The men of that generation will not accomplish any works at all and temptation will come upon them; and those who will persevere in that day will be greater than either us or



our fathers”. Reading St. Ignaty Brianchaninov’s instructions for contemporary monastics, first published a little over a century ago and known in English as “The Arena” can be downright depressing. “We are extremely weak,” he says, “while the temptations that surround us have increased enormously... Spiritual activity is quite unknown to us. We are completely engrossed in bodily activity and that with the purpose of appearing pious and holy in the eyes of the world and to get its reward. We have abandoned the hard and narrow way of salvation... we monks are diminished more than any nation, and we are humbled in all the earth today for our sins...” At the end of the Arena, St. Ignaty uses the image of beggars eating the scraps left over from a sumptuous banquet to describe the monks of the latter days, where the Lord says to them, “Brothers, in making my arrangements for the banquet, I did not have you in view. So I have not given you a proper dinner, and I am not giving you the gifts which have all been given away according to a previously made calculation which only I can understand.” If someone today so much as even dares think of monasticism everything around him, both worldly and Orthodox, of the Church seems to say, “Forget it! Don’t even try! It’s absolutely useless!”

In spite of the hardships and the off-putting advice of even the most authoritative Orthodox sources, many people still do choose to leave everything and everyone behind, to take up the cross of monastic struggles and to follow our Saviour. I don’t think that it’s too optimistic to speak of a sort of revival of monasticism in our times. In the 20 years that I’ve been struggling to be a monastic my monastery has doubled in size. Every week we get letters and phone-calls from women and girls that want to come, to enter or to learn more about our life. They are clearly searching for a deeper, more intense spiritual life and some form of dedication. Our monasteries in the Holy Land are growing and flourishing. Since the years of Perestroika in Russia hundreds, if not thousands of monasteries have been opened. When I travel there, on the street every few feet of the way someone comes up to ask where I’m from, what monastery, for prayers, for a word of advice or consolation. They weep at the very sight of a nun and press lists of names into my hands, and their last kopecks and rubles. A very serious writer noted in surprise that in Russia more tourists visit monasteries than exhibits, museums or zoos.

What is it that continues to draw people to this way of life that is essentially a mystery, something that even the holiest monks speak of with awe and trembling? Above all, monasticism is the way of repentance. Not of the sort of repentance when we stop to sigh and feel sorry about the bad things we’ve done and then quickly move on to the next item on our list of things to do, or mumble a list of sins at confession so that we can go to Communion, but the sort that means a complete turn-about, a conversion, a profound change of lifestyle. This is the repentance of the Prodigal Son of the Gospels, who comes to realize that his entire way of life has been very wrong, and who leaves it all behind to go home to his father to ask forgiveness. The service of monastic tonsure begins with a stichera paraphrasing this parable: “Make haste to open unto me Thy fatherly embrace, for as the Prodigal I have wasted my life. In the unfailing wealth of Thy mercy, O Saviour, reject not my heart in its poverty. For with compunction I cry to Thee, O Lord: Father, I have sinned against heaven and before Thee.” It is this longing for our Heavenly Father’s embrace, for His forgiveness, and for a home with Him that still makes people turn their backs on everything and trudge along this rocky road.

The first step along this road is renunciation of the world, leaving it behind. This does not mean simply quitting school or your job, closing your bank account, moving to a monastery, putting on black and saying your prayers. According to the Holy Fathers the term “world” means the sum total of all our passions, attachments, opinions, petty likes and dislikes; everything that distances us from God and prevents us from discerning His Will. “No one can draw nigh to God save the man who has separated himself from the



world. But I call separation not the departure of the body, but departure from the world's affairs", says St. Isaac the Syrian, one of the greatest monastic fathers of all time. "...No one who has communion with the world can have communion with God, and no one who has concern for the world can have concern for God", he continues." If you truly love God", begins St. John of the Ladder, another monastic guide, "and long to reach the Kingdom that is to come, if you are pained by your failings and are mindful of punishment and of the eternal judgment, if you are truly afraid to die, then it will not be possible to have an attachment, or anxiety, or concern for money, possessions, for family relationships, for worldly glory, for love and brotherhood, indeed, for anything of earth... Stripped of all thought of these, caring nothing about them, one will turn freely to Christ..."

At this point the most common question is "how do I know?" How do I know that I'm called to the particular form of renunciation of the world that monasticism represents? All of us have to leave the world in the sense of struggling to overcome our passions in one way or another; there's no question about that. But how can a person be sure that the Lord means for him to do it by embracing the monastic life? How can we discern the will of God in this case? It's very true that there's no specific "monastic type" or particular character trait that defines someone as a candidate. My monastery has all sorts of people: fat, thin, old, young, outgoing, very shy, well-educated, high-school drop-outs, of the sweetest disposition, and some can be downright nasty at times. They did all sorts of things: one was a magazine editor, another a seamstress, someone was a semi-professional ball player, another sister has a PHD in philosophy, one of the youngest sisters came to us practically off the streets. Some of them had happy childhoods, others hated their parents, some of them were extremely successful at what they did, others hated their jobs. But all of them at some point in time became convinced of the necessity of dropping everything and starting along the road home to their Heavenly Father.





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People often talk of vocations and callings, assuming that there has to be some sort of mystical experience to convince you to become a monastic. It's true that a lot of monastics can look back to a particular event that was the turning point in their lives. 9 times out of 10 there's nothing really otherworldly about it. If you hear voices or see angels probably the last place where you belong is a monastery! One of our sisters made her decision during an akathist before a miracle-working Icon of the Mother of God. All of her friends had gone dancing that night, but she chose to attend this akathist, and in the middle of it, it dawned on her that she was having a really good time; much better than she would have had dancing, and that it would make sense to do this full-time, as it were. Another sister was moved by the example of 2 nuns she met at the Synod Cathedral in NY. They were there to collect money for the Holy Land. Someone from the parish attacked them for no reason, accusing them of taking food from the kitchen without permission. Most of us would have tried to reason and explain the mistake, but one of the nuns, in a beautiful example of monastic humility, simply made a prostration and begged forgiveness. The fact that there really are still people today who try to do what the Gospels teach was a real revelation, and within a year this girl was a novice. Someone else was moved by a passage from St. John Cassian. One of our older nuns made her decision when her parish priest asked her if she knew anyone that might consider entering being a nun. This was soon after World War II, and this person had assumed that there were no longer any monasteries left, that monasticism wasn't even a possibility. And when the priest asked, everything fell into place for her.

Even if there is such a moment, the choice and the decision to follow a monastic path is almost always a period of real struggle, of doubts, fears and temptations. A lot of the monastics I know, when the thought first came to them, wanted nothing to do with it and were quite shocked by the idea. The Holy Fathers emphasize that there is nothing that the evil one hates as much as monasticism and he will do everything possible to turn someone away from this path. If one is at all spiritually alert you can practically see and hear him at work at this point. I've known people to get incredible job offers, receive huge amounts of money, marriage proposals from tall, dark, handsome and rich men. An older nun I knew had her husband, missing for 20 years, turn up on her doorstep the day before she left. Another one had her son threaten to shoot himself, someone else's mother starved herself for 6 weeks. If you speak to monastics you truly will find that fact is stranger than fiction! In spite of the trials, there's a growing conviction that there is nothing else that you can do, that no matter what, the monastic life is the only viable alternative. And this nags at you until there's just no other way out.



Once a monk escapes from the world he begins to try to finally think clearly and to concentrate on the things that will determine his eternal fate. He begins to really understand and to feel that we, wretched sinners, really are perishing, that we desperately need a Redeemer and Someone to heal our souls, and that in Him alone is life, that everything besides is empty and senseless. He begins to really feel and experience this, not just to say the words. Only when a person stops listening to the noise and clatter of the world, turns his eyes away from its wild, psychedelic colors, and when he gets over the hangover that the world leaves you with does he begin to see himself clearly and to discern the meaning and aim of life on this earth and to struggle against his enemy, the evil one. St. John of the Ladder tells us, “All who enter upon the good fight, the monastic life, which is tough and painful, but also easy, must realize that they must leap into the fire, if they...expect the heavenly fire to dwell within them...let everyone test himself, and then eat the bread of the monastic life with its bitter herbs...and drink the cup of it with its tears... Yes, it’s true. The monastic life is not “fun”. Most of us, especially those that had to go through a severe trial to leave the world, experience a “honeymoon” period, when you finally take the plunge, make the break with the world and get to a monastery. It’s such a relief to have all that behind you and to have finally started out on the way. Everything and everyone seems wonderful, you’re full of zeal, and you can practically see the grace, it’s so abundant. For some monastics this stage can go on for years. But sooner or later reality strikes and you see that everything that’s been written about the hardships of monastic life is not just fancy words or symbolic phrases or allegory. It’s not the physical side that’s hard. With some effort and discipline anyone can learn to get up early and to stand through long church services, to make prostrations and to work and work hard at jobs that you don’t necessarily like. A lot of people in the world have a much more



difficult life in that sense. It's the encounter with yourself and who you really are and the struggle to change that, that is the slow but painful, day by day, minute by minute work of the monk. The work is done largely through our contacts and conflicts with other people. St. John of the Ladder is very blunt about this: "...Derided, mocked, jeered, you must accept the denial of your will. You must patiently endure opposition, suffer neglect without complaint, put up with violent arrogance. You must be ready for injustice, and not grieve when you are slandered; you must not be angered by contempt and you must show humility when you have been condemned." For most of us the most difficult element in all this is giving up your own will. In one of the most quoted monastic sayings Abba Dorotheus, another great teacher of the monastic life says: "I know of no fall that happens to a monk that does not come from trusting his own will and his own judgment... Do you know someone who has fallen? Be sure that he directed himself... nothing is more grievous... nothing is more pernicious."

When I was a young novice I would get really annoyed at the writings of the Holy Fathers and the constant repetition that in the latter days monks will not be able to perform any podvigs, or great ascetic feats, but will work out their salvation through patience and long-suffering. "How boring!" I would think, "Surely if we set our minds and spirits to it, we can do it, too? How come all we're allowed is to sit around and be patient?" The secret here is that this is truly a great mercy of the Lord. Today we are not only unchristian in our approach to life, in our thoughts, words and actions, we are outright anti-Christian. Were the Lord to grant us the grace and give us the strength to perform even just 1/10 of the ascetic feats of previous times, we would not only not profit, but the resulting pride and vain-glory would lead us straight to perdition. This is especially true in monasticism, where, for the inexperienced, the intense work on one's self is very easy to confuse with the self-analysis that so many self-help/"feel-good-about-yourself" guides teach today.

Take, for example, the concept of "moods". This is not an Orthodox concept; we do not have moods, we are afflicted by passions and we strive to acquire virtues. "Being in a bad mood" can never excuse your behavior in a monastery. This can be very hard for a novice to accept. Likewise, we do not have any "rights"; we have obligations and obediences, and we owe it to the Lord Himself to fulfill them, but no one owes us anything. Similarly, we cannot expect to be "happy" and "fulfilled"; we come to a monastery to weep for our sins. Today just about everything is "boring". We've tried everything, we're stubborn and very self-assured. To cure the boredom, some people decide to try monasticism. Young people especially want nothing more than to make an impression, cause a sensation. What could be more sensational than to suddenly have all your friends see you 30 pounds thinner, draped in black, clutching a prayer rope, expounding spiritual wisdom? Worst of all, in our times people are prouder than ever before. We take pride in our imaginary virtues, we even take pride in our sins. And most of all, we are proud of our minds. We see ourselves as great thinkers, understanding psychologists, brilliant philosophers, who of course can understand all the finer, most profound monastic truths much more deeply than those that came before us. The notions of humility, obedience, self-condemnation, meekness and renunciation of one's will used to "go without saying" for Orthodox Christians, but today they have to be learned. One of the Russian new martyrs, Vladyka Varnava Beliaev, wrote that it takes 30 years for someone to start being a monk. That was said 80 years ago; today it probably takes 40 or 50!



So why bother? Is it really worth it? I remember Metropolitan Philaret, paraphrasing St. John of the Ladder, saying, “If everyone knew how hard it was in monasteries, no one would ever go. But if they knew the joys and rewards of monastic life, they would all come running. And it’s true, the rewards and the blessings really are there. One of the Optina Elders, St. Barsanuphius, taught, “True blessedness can only be acquired in a monastery. You can be saved in the world, but it is impossible to be completely purified.. .or to rise up and live like the angels and live a creative spiritual life in the world. All the ways of the world, laws destroy or at least slow down the development of the soul. And that’s why people can attain the angelic life only in monasteries... Monasticism is blessedness; the most blessed state that is possible for a person on this earth. There is nothing higher than this blessedness, because monasticism hands you the key to spiritual life.”

In what do we find this blessedness? There is the knowledge that every day of your life and every minute of your day are sanctified and significant before God. Even your “bad” days and your really low days having meaning before Him. As long as you live the life consciously there is no wasted time. There is the solemnity and beauty of the Divine Services of our Church, which is truly the beginning of the life of Heaven still here on earth. In the world our attendance in Church is always time stolen away from the world’s affairs, a welcome respite, a sort of spiritual treat. In the monastery the services determine the very patterns of life, and they are the real life; everything else is time stolen away from them. They nourish us, instruct us, and in a certain sense even entertain us. When I was entering the monastery one of my greatest fears was that eventually I would find the services boring-the same thing, year in, year out, forever. Instead I find that they contain such vast wealth and so many levels, each more profound than the one before it, that a lifetime is nowhere near enough to begin to appreciate them. The saints have become my close friends and mentors, I experience the feasts differently each year, every Great Lent and every Pascha are a completely new revelation. Above all, in monasticism there is what St. Theophan the Recluse called “being



sure that God keeps you as His own". If you accept the ways of the Lord as your life your conscience will soon be lit up with the knowledge that He, too has accepted you as His own. I remember the night I spent in church after my tonsure, after making my monastic vows. I had such a vivid sense that the Lord was with me, it seemed that Heaven was literally just around the corner, that if I opened the door of the church it would be right there. This wasn't a feeling; I knew this.



There is nothing more beautiful than the way monastics die. Most of our sisters die having received Holy Communion, surrounded by the community, with prayers and chanting and tears. Not the desperate tears of the world, but tears at parting with a friend and sister, even if just for a while. The funeral service of a monk, which is quite different than that of a lay person, is a lesson on the monastic life and the solidly grounded hope of eternal life that it represents rather than a meditation on death. For those that spend their life on the threshold of the Age to Come death is merely stepping into the next room.

We do give up a lot in monastic life. My arms have ached after holding my friends' children, knowing that I would never hold my own. But the Lord has given me many children of the spirit amongst the young novices that I work with in the monastery. A monastic will never know the special intimacy and closeness that is the blessing of an Orthodox marriage. And a married person will never know the spiritual kinship of a monastic community. There are no vacations from monasticism, no sick days, no time off. But every day is a feast.

"Monasticism", one of the Optina elders said, "supports the entire world. And when there will be no more monasticism the Dread Judgment will be upon us.

And for those of us that are drawn to this way of life there simply is no other way to live. One writer described it like this: "Some people are very single-minded by nature. And there are ideas that permeate the lives of such people down to the very last detail. Everything beautiful, joyous and of consolation in this



life is overshadowed for them by the memory of one thing, by a single thought: that of Christ Crucified. No matter how bright the sun might be, how beautiful nature, God's creation is, how tempting faraway places might seem, they remember that Christ was Crucified, and everything is dim in comparison. We might hear the most beautiful music, the most inspired speeches, but these souls hear one thing: Christ was Crucified, and what can ever drown out the sound of the nails being hammered into His flesh? Describe to them the happiness of a family life, of a beloved husband or wife, of children, but Christ was Crucified, and how can we not show the Lord that He isn't alone, we haven't deserted Him. There are those that are willing to forget everything in the world so as to stand by His Cross, suffer His suffering and wonder at His Sacrifice. For them the world is empty, and only Christ Crucified speaks to their hearts. And only they know what sweetness they taste still on this earth by sharing in the eternal mystery of the Cross and only they hear what He says to them when they come to Him after a life full of incomprehensible hardships and inexplicable joy.

Lesna Monastery, Provemont, 5/18 December 2000.

St. Sabbas the Sanctified