

Orthodox Christian Monasticism

The innermost spiritual sense of Orthodox Monasticism is revealed in joyful mourning. This paradoxical phrase denotes a spiritual state in which a monk in his prayer grieves for the sins of the world at the same time experiences the regenerating spiritual joy of Christ's forgiveness and resurrection. A monk dies in order to live, he forgets himself in order to find his real self in God, he becomes ignorant of worldly knowledge in order to attain real spiritual wisdom which is given only to the humble ones. (Ed.)

With the development of monasticism in the Church there appeared a peculiar way of life, which however did not proclaim a new morality. The Church does not have one set of moral rules for the laity and another for monks, nor does it divide the faithful into classes according to their obligations towards God. The Christian life is the same for everyone. All Christians have in common that "their being and name is from Christ" 1. This means that the true Christian must ground his life and conduct in Christ, something which is hard to achieve in the world.

What is difficult in the world is approached with dedication in the monastic life. In his spiritual life the monk simply tries to do what every Christian should try to do: to live according to God's commandments. The fundamental principles of monasticism are not different from those of the lives of all the faithful. This is especially apparent in the history of the early Church, before monasticism appeared.

In the tradition of the Church there is a clear preference for celibacy as opposed to the married state. This stance is not of course hostile to marriage, which is recognized as a profound mystery 2, but simply indicates the practical obstacles marriage puts in the way of the pursuit of the spiritual life. For this reason, from the earliest days of Christianity many of the faithful chose celibacy. Thus Athenagoras the Confessor in the second century wrote: "You can find many men and women who remain unmarried all their lives in the hope of coming closer to God"3.

From the very beginning the Christian life has been associated with self denial and sacrifice: "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me"4. Christ calls on us to give ourselves totally to him: "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"5.

Finally, fervent and unceasing prayer, obedience to the elders of the Church, brotherly love and humility, as well as all the essential virtues of the monastic life were cultivated by the members of the Church from its earliest days.

One cannot deny that the monk and the married man have different ways of life, but this does not alter their common responsibility towards God and His commandments. Every one of us has his own special gift within the one and indivisible body of Christ's Church 6. Every way of life, whether married or solitary, is equally subject to God's absolute will. Hence no way of life can be taken as an excuse for ignoring or selectively responding to Christ's call and His commandments. Both paths demand effort and determination.

St Chrysostom is particularly emphatic on this point: "You greatly delude yourself and err, if you think that one thing is demanded from the layman and another from the monk; since the difference between them is in that whether one is married or not, while in everything else they have the same responsibilities... Because all must rise to the same height; and what has turned the world upside down is that we think only the monk must live rigorously, while the rest are allowed to live a life of indolence" 7. Referring to the observance of particular commandments in the Gospels, he says: "Whoever is angry with his brother without cause, regardless of whether he is a layman or a monk, opposes God in the same way. And whoever looks at a woman lustfully, regardless of his status, commits the same sin". In general, he observes that in giving His commandments Christ does not make distinction between people: "A man is not defined by whether he is a layman or a monk, but by the way he thinks" 8.

Christ's commandments demand strictness of life that we often expect only from monks. The requirements of decent and sober behaviour, the condemnation of wealth and adoption of frugality 9, the avoidance of idle talk and the call to show selfless love are not given only for monks, but for all the faithful.

Therefore, the rejection of worldly thinking is the duty not only of monks, but of all Christians. The faithful must not have a worldly mind, but sojourn as strangers and travellers with their minds fixed on God. Their home is not on earth, but in the kingdom of heaven: "For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come" 10. The Church can be seen as a community in exodus. The world is its temporary home

but the Church is bound for the kingdom of God. Just as the Israelites, freed from bondage in Egypt, journeyed towards Jerusalem through many trials and tribulations, so Christians, freed from the bondage of sin, journey through many trials and tribulations towards the kingdom of heaven.

In the early days this exodus from the world did not involve a change of place but a change of the way of life. A man does not reject God and turns towards the world physically but spiritually, because God was and is everywhere and fulfills everything, so in the same way the rejection of the world and turning towards God was not understood in physical sense but as a change of the way of life. This is especially clear in the lives of the early Christians. Although they lived in the world they were fully aware that they did not come from it nor did they belong to it: "In the world but not of the world". And those who lived in chastity and poverty, which became later fundamental principles of the monastic life, did not abandon the world or take to the mountains.

Physical detachment from the world helps the soul to reject the worldly way of life. Experience shows that human salvation is harder to achieve in the world. As Basil the Great points out, living among men who do not care for the strict observance of God's commandments is harmful. It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to answer Christ's call to take up one's cross and follow Him within the bounds of worldly life. Seeing the multitude of sinners, one not only fails to see his own sins but also falls into temptation to believe that he has achieved something, because we tend to compare ourselves with those who are worse than we are. Furthermore, the hustle and bustle of everyday life distracts us from the remembrance of God. It does not only prevent us from feeling the joy of intense communion with God, but leads us to contempt and forgetfulness of the divine will.

This does not mean that detachment from the world guarantees salvation, but surely does help us a lot in our spiritual life. When someone devotes himself wholly to God and His will, nothing can stop him from being saved. St. Chrysostom says: "There is no obstacle to a worker striving for virtue, but men in office, and those who have a wife and children to look after, and servants to see to, and those in positions of authority can also take care to be virtuous"¹².

Saint Simeon the New Theologian observes: "Living in a city does not prevent us from carrying out God's commandments if we are zealous, and silence and solitude are of no benefit if we are slothful and neglectful"¹³. Elsewhere he says that it is possible for all, not only monks but laymen too, to "eternally and continuously repent and weep and pray to God, and by these actions to acquire all the other virtues"¹⁴.

Orthodox monasticism has always been associated with stillness or silence, which is seen primarily as an internal rather than an external state. External silence is sought in order to attain inner stillness of mind more easily. This stillness is not a kind of inertia or inaction, but awakening and activation of the spiritual life. It is intense vigilance and total devotion to God. Living in a quiet place the monk succeeds in knowing himself better, fighting his passions more deeply and purifying his heart more fully, so as to be found worthy of beholding God.

The father of St Gregory Palamas, Constantine, lived a life of stillness as a senator and member of the imperial court in Constantinople. The essence of this kind of life is detachment from worldly passions and complete devotion to God. This is why St Gregory Palamas says that salvation in Christ is possible for all: "The farmer and the leather worker and the mason and the tailor and the weaver, and in general all those who earn their living with their hands and in the sweat of their brow, who cast out of their souls the desire for wealth, fame and comfort, are indeed blessed"¹⁵. In the same spirit St Nicolas Kavalas observes that it is not necessary for someone to flee to the desert, eat unusual food, change his dress, ruin his health or attempt some other such thing in order to remain devoted to God¹⁶.

The monastic life, with its physical withdrawal from the world to the desert, began about the middle of the third century. This flight of Christians to the desert was partly caused by the harsh Roman persecutions of the time. The growth of monasticism, however, which began in the time of Constantine the Great, was largely due to the refusal of many Christians to adapt to the more worldly character of the now established Church, and their desire to lead a strictly Christian life. Thus monasticism developed simultaneously in various places in the southeast Mediterranean, Egypt, Palestine, Sinai, Syria and Cyprus, and soon after reached Asia Minor and finally Europe. During the second millennium, however, Mount Athos appeared as the centre of Orthodox monasticism.

The commonest and safest form of the monastic life is the coenobitic communion. In the coenobitic monastery everything is shared: living quarters, food, work, prayer, common efforts, cares, struggles and achievements. The leader and spiritual father of the coenobium is the abbot. The exhortation to the abbot in the Charter of St Athanasius the Athonite is typical: "Take care that the brethren have everything in common. No one must own as much as a needle. Your body and soul shall be your own, and nothing else. Everything must be shared equally with love between all your spiritual children, brethren and fathers".

The coenobium is the ideal Christian community, where no distinction is drawn between mine and yours, but everything is designed to cultivate a common attitude and a spirit of fraternity. In the coenobium the obedience of every monk to his abbot and his brotherhood, loving kindness, solidarity and hospitality are of the greatest importance. As St Theodore of Studium observes, the whole community of the faithful should in the final analysis be a coenobitic Church 17. Thus the monastic coenobium is the most consistent attempt to achieve this and an image of Church in small.

In its "fuga mundi", monasticism underlines the Church's position as an "anti-community" within the world, and by its intense spiritual asceticism cultivates its eschatological spirit. The monastic life is described as "the angelic state", in other words a state of life that while on earth follows the example of the life in heaven. Virginité and celibacy come within this framework, anticipating the condition of souls in the life to come, where "they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven" 8.

Many see celibacy as a defining characteristic of monastic life. This does not mean, however, that celibacy is the most important aspect of the monastic life: it simply gives this distinctiveness to this way of life. All the other obligations, even the other two monastic vows of obedience and poverty, essentially concern all the faithful. Needless to say, all this takes on a special form in the monastic life, but that has no bearing on the essence of the matter.

All Christians are obliged to keep the Lord's commandments, but this requires efforts. Fallen human nature, enslaved by its passions is reluctant to fulfill this obligation. It seeks pleasure and avoids the pain involved in fighting the passions and selfishness. The monastic life is so arranged as to facilitate this work. On the other hand the worldly life, particularly in our secular society, makes it harder to be an ascetic. The problem for the Christian in the world is that he is called upon to reach the same goal under adverse conditions.

The tonsure, with cutting of hair, is called a "second baptism" 19. Baptism, however, is one and the same for all members of the Church. It is participation in the death and resurrection of Christ. The tonsure does not repeat, but renews and activates the grace of the baptism. The monastic vows are essentially not different from those taken at baptism, with the exception of the vow of celibacy. Furthermore, hair is also cut during baptism.

The monastic life points the way to perfection. However, the whole Church is called to perfection. All the faithful, both laymen and monks, are called to become perfect following the divine example: "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" 20. But while the monk affirms the radical nature of the Christian life, the layman is content to regard it conventionally. The conventional morality of the layman on the one hand and the radical morality of the monk on the other create a dialectical differentiation that takes the form of a dialectical antithesis.

St Maximus the Confessor, in contrasting the monastic with the worldly life, observes that a layman's successes are a monk's failures, and vice versa: "The achievements of the worldly are failures for monks; and the achievements of monks are failures for the worldly. When the monk is exposed to what the world sees as success—wealth, fame, power, pleasure, good health and many children, he is destroyed. And when a worldly man finds himself in the state desired by monks—poverty, humility, weakness, self restraint, mortification and suchlike, he considers it a disaster. Indeed, in such despair many may consider hanging themselves, and some have actually done so" 21.

Of course the comparison here is between the perfect monk and the very worldly Christian. However, in more usual circumstances within the Church the same things will naturally function differently, but this difference could never reach diametrical opposition. Thus for example, wealth and fame cannot be seen as equally destructive for monks and laymen. These things are always bad for monks, because they conflict with the way of life the monks have chosen. For laymen, however, wealth and fame may be beneficial, even though they involve grave risks. The existence of the family, and of the wider secular society with its various needs and demands, not only justify but sometimes make it necessary to accumulate wealth or assume office. Those things that may unite in the world divide in the monastic life. The ultimate unifier is Christ Himself.

The Christian life does not depend only on human effort but primarily on God's grace. Ascetic exercises in all their forms and degrees aim at nothing more than preparing man to harmonise his will with that of God and receive the grace of the Holy Spirit. This harmonisation attains its highest expression and perfection in prayer. "In true prayer we enter into and dwell in the Divine Being by the power of the Holy Spirit" 22. This leads man to his archetype and makes him a true person in the likeness of his Creator.

The grace of the Christian life is not to be found in its outward forms. It is not found in ascetic exercises, fasts, vigils and mortification of the flesh. Indeed, when these exercises are practiced without discernment they become abhorrent. This repulsiveness is no longer confined to their external form but comes to

characterise their inner content. They become abhorrent not only because outwardly they appear as a denial of life, contempt for material things or self-abandonment, but also because they mortify the spirit, encourage pride and cultivate self justification.

The Christian life is not a denial but an affirmation. It is not death, but life. And it is not only affirmation and life, but the only true affirmation and the only true life. It is the true affirmation because it goes beyond all possibility of denial and the only true life because it conquers death. The negative appearance of the Christian life in its outward forms is due precisely to its attempt to stand beyond all human denial. Since there is no human affirmation that does not end in denial, and no worldly life that does not end in death, the Church takes its stand and reveals its life after accepting every human denial and affirming every form of earthly death.

The power of the Christian life lies in the hope of resurrection, and the goal of ascetic striving is to partake in the resurrection. The monastic life, as the angelic and heavenly life lived in time, is the foreknowledge and foretaste of eternal life. Its aim is not to cast off the human element, but clothe oneself with incorruptibility and immortality: "For while we are still in this tent, we sigh with anxiety; not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life" 23.

There are sighing and tears produced by the presence of sin, as well as the suffering to be free of the passions and regain a pure heart. These things demand ascetic struggles, and undoubtedly have a negative form, since they aim at humility. They are exhausting and painful, because they are concerned with states and habits that have become second nature. It is however precisely through this abasement, self purification, that man clears the way for God's grace to appear and to act within his heart. God does not manifest Himself to an impure heart.

Monks are the "guardians". They choose to constrain their bodily needs in order to attain the spiritual freedom offered by Christ. They tie themselves down in death's realm in order to experience more intensely the hope of the life to come. They reconcile themselves with space, where man is worn down and annihilated, feel it as their body, transform it into the Church and orientate it towards the kingdom of God.

The monk's journey to perfection is gradual and is connected with successive renunciations, which can be summarised in three. The first renunciation involves completely abandoning the world. This is not limited to things, but includes people and parents. The second is renunciation of the individual will, and the third is freedom from pride, which is identified with liberation from the sway of the world 24.

These successive renunciations have a positive, not a negative meaning. They permit a man to fully open up and be perfected "in the image and likeness" of God. When man is freed from the world and from himself, he expands without limits. He becomes a true person, which "encloses" within himself the whole of humanity as Christ himself does. That is why, on the moral plane, the Christian is called upon to love all human beings, even his enemies. Then God Himself comes and dwells within him, and the man arrives to the fullness of his theanthropic being 25. Here we can see the greatness of the human person, and can understand the superhuman struggles needed for his perfection.

The life of monasticism is life of perpetual spiritual ascent. While the world goes on its earthbound way, and the faithful with their obligations and distractions of the world try to stay within the institutional limits of the church tradition, monasticism goes to other direction and soars. It rejects any kind of compromise and seeks the absolute. It launches itself from this world and heads for the kingdom of God. This is in essence the goal of the Church itself.

In Church tradition this path is pictured as a ladder leading to heaven. Not everyone manages to reach the top of this spiritual ladder. Many are to be found on the first rungs. Others rise higher. There are also those who fall from a higher or a lower rung. The important thing is not the height reached, but the unceasing struggle to rise ever higher. Most important of all, this ascent is achieved through ever increasing humility, that is through ever increasing descent. "Keep thy mind in hell, and despair not", was the word of God to Saint Silouan of Mount Athos. When man descends into the hell of his inner struggle having God within him, then he is lifted up and finds the fullness of being 26.

At the top of this spiritual ladder are the "fools for Christ's sake", as the Apostle Paul calls himself and the other apostles 27, or "the fools for Christ's sake", who "play the madman for the love of Christ and mock the vanity of the world" 28, Seeking after glory among men, says Christ, obstructs belief in God 29. Only when man rejects pride can he defeat the world and devote himself to God 30.

In the lives of monks the Christian sees examples of men who took their Christian faith seriously and committed themselves to the path which everyone is called by Christ to follow. Not all of them attained perfection, but they all tried, and all rose to a certain height. Not all possessed the same talent, but all strove

as good and faithful servants. They are not held up as examples to be imitated, especially by laymen. They are however valuable signposts on the road to perfection, which is common for all and has its climax in the perfectness of God.

1. Maximos the Confessor, *Mystagogia* 1, PG91, 665C.

2. See Eph. 5, 32

3. *Presbeia* 33. Also see Justin, Confession 1, 15, 6.

4. St. Mark 8, 34.

5. St. Matthew 10, 37

6. "Each has his own special gift from God, one of one kind and one of another" I Cor. 7, 7

7. *Pros piston patera* (To the faithful father) 3, 14, PG47, 372- 74.

8. Ibid 373.

9. "If we have food and clothing, with these we shall be content. I Tim 6,8.

10. Heb. 13, 14.

11. See *Oroi kata platos* (Monastic rules in full) 6, PG 31, 925A.

12. Catechism 7, 28, ed A. Wenger, "Sources

Chritiennes' vol.50, Paris 21970m 0,243,

13. Catechism 12, 132-5, ed B. Krivocheine, "Sources Chritiennes' vol.104, Paris 1964, p.374.

14. Catechism 5, 122-5, ed B. Knvocheine, "Sources Chritiennes". volL96, Paris 1963, p.386.

15. Homily 15, PG151, 180 BC.

16. See *On the life in Christ* 6, PG150, 660A

17. See Letter 53,PG99, 1264CD.

18. St. Matthew 22, 30

19. See Service for the Little Habit. The Greater Prayer-Book, p. 192.

20. St. Matthew 5, 48.

21. Maximos the Confessor, On love 3,85,PG90, 1044A.

22. Archimandrite Sophrony, *Ascetic practice and theory*, Essex, Eng/and 1996, p.26. 23 2 Cor. 5,4. 24 See Stage 2, PG88, 657A. For a comparison of the patristic tradition on the three stages of renunciation see the book by Archimandrite Sophrony, *Asceticism and Contemptation*, p.26f.

25. See Archimandrite Sophrony, *We Shall See Him as He is*, Essex, England 3-1996, p.389.

26. See Archimandrite Sophrony, *Saint Silouan of Mount Athos*, Essex, England 7-1995, p.572 Also *Asceticism and Contemptation*, p.42.

27. 1 Cor. 4, 10

28. The Elder Paisios, *Letters*, Souroti, Thessaloni 1994, p.235. 29 St. John 5, 44. 30 See Archimandrite Sophrony, *Asceticism and Contemptation*, pp.33-4.



Georgios I. Mantzarides Professor of the Theological School Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (abridged text from the book *Images of Athos*, by monk Chariton). This page was retrieved from www.archive.org after decani.yunet.com went defunct following the Kosovo conflict. This page was originally created by monks at Decani Monastery in Kosovo. It has been slightly edited for inclusion on this site.