

Why Monasticism?

It is a great joy to be with you all today. I am reminded of when I began attending the St. Herman's Youth Conference, 10-12 years ago. In those days the conference was held at Holy Trinity Monastery in Jordanville, NY. Back then there were maybe 70-80 people at most attending, so it does my heart good to see so many young people coming here today, and I trust that this is evidence of the growth of Orthodoxy in America. And not simply growth in numbers - a lot of people coming into the Church - but the development of a vibrant, conservative Orthodox faith, one that does not bow down to the current trends of modernism and ecumenism, of trying to fit in with today's world, but is witnessing unashamedly to the traditions and message set forth by our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, Who remains the same yesterday, today and forever.

So, it is good to see you all here today, but I'm a little fearful, too, that as our Church grows in numbers, in popularity if you will, it doesn't cause us to weaken our faith, to forget that for Orthodox Christians, whether monastic or lay, we are always to a lesser or greater degree going to be out of step with the ways of the world. For what is the basic message of Orthodox Christianity - it is that Christ is risen, that the God-man Jesus Christ was born on earth not for worldly fame or riches or honor or power but to lead and direct the eyes of the heart of each man born on earth to the heavenly kingdom, the kingdom not of this world, and it is in monastic life that one has the opportunity to fulfill that message, to prepare for life in the heavenly kingdom, to the greatest degree.

Everything about a monastic bespeaks this desire to embrace the world to come: the color and the style of the clothing we wear symbolizes the fact that we die to this world; we live in communities, off the beaten track so to speak, attempting to separate ourselves from the busyness and the distractions of daily life, of the current events of the world; the food we eat is meant only to sustain us, to enable us to work and pray in the coming day, not something for us to enjoy, or just to improve our health or to preoccupy ourselves in taking care of and preparing.

Now, why would anyone choose to embrace this way of life? Especially a young person with so many things to attracted him in today's world. Well, one answer to that question explains my nostalgia for the days when the Conference was held at the Monastery, because it is when one sees living examples of monasticism that one can form an attraction to it. For how can we follow a way of life that we do not even know exists? As Fr. Gregory mentioned, I was raised in a New Calendar Greek Archdiocese church, one that at the external level was cutting itself off from its roots. The priests were told to trim their beards, to cut their hair, to wear a suit rather than a cassock, bowing to the weakness of our nature by telling the people it is OK not to follow the fasts, that it is OK to make sure that Divine Liturgy does not last more than two hours (we wouldn't want people to miss the football game) and no, you don't have to bother to come to church on Saturday night or feast days, we know you are all too busy with your daily lives, it's really too much trouble to come to church so much during the week.

It follows logically that with this diminishing of the liturgical life of the church, the spiritual life of the church begins to weaken, and one of the most obvious casualties of a weak spirituality or weak spiritual life is lack of appreciation or recognition of monastic life. As I was growing up and even into my college years there were no monasteries for me to visit in my days in the New Calendar church, but by God's providence, my horizons were opened when a Greek fellow (from Ann Arbor) who was studying at the

seminary in Jordanville began giving me issues of *Orthodox Life* to read. The contrast between New Calendar publications and the pictures in *Orthodox Life*, the priests and bishops with long beards, was a real eye-opener for me.

It was through this contact that I first come to Jordanville, where I could begin to appreciate and to see how the monastic life was being lived. And I think that is very important, when you actually begin to see it. There is a story from the life of Saint Anthony, one of the fathers of monasticism who lived in the desert. Though he lived apart from people, pilgrims would come from time to time, individually and in groups, seeking his advice because he was a holy man. A certain man would come with some frequency, but while everyone else was always asking questions of Saint Anthony, this man was silent. This went on year after year until finally Saint Anthony said to him, "My friend, my brother, how is it that you do not ask me a question?" And he said, "Father, it is enough for me to see your face and I am enriched." I think that is the experience I had in Jordanville, seeing for the first time older monks who had brought that tradition from Russia and were living the monastic life - not in an outspoken way, not by taking part in lectures but by simply living the life. One could sense the prayers that they were offering for other people, and I think I can safely say that many of the nuns, both in the women's community that now exists in Jordanville and in the community that I belong to in Gethsemane, have been influenced by the older monks from Jordanville and by monks all around the world that are offering prayers for people in the world.

So in part, the call to monastic life is something spiritual, it is the unseen prayers of the ones that have come before us that lead one to monastic life. But right now I would like to discuss a little more explicitly why one is drawn into monastic life and why it is a path that any one of you might consider following.

In order to ask why one should choose monastic life, we must first clearly define what monasticism is - and what it is not. One common misconception is that misfits enter monasteries, those that are a bit strange, or cannot make it in the world; or, Gee, I just couldn't find the right person to marry, so I guess all I can do is enter a monastery. If that is the reason someone enters a monastery, you can be sure he will not last there very long. To enter monastic life takes a great deal of conviction, of commitment, of stubbornness really. Not only is one going to be called upon to buck the trends of the world, to take oneself from the pleasures of this world, to resist the powerful pull and distractions and the pleasures of the material life, but one is also placed in constant day-to-day battle with oneself. Living the monastic life, even more than life in the world, forces one to look at his weaknesses, to admit them, and to have the courage to recognize them, and to stand naked before God, realizing that in His mercy lies one's only hope of salvation. To follow this process one cannot be motivated to embrace monasticism simply as another alternative; it is something that one really has to think through before trying to follow.

And there is another pitfall that I think is coming into today's world. There has been a movement by people who have been members of the Orthodox Church but who have left the fold, and they have been publishing books and suggesting to young people that they should embrace the monastic life, but they are phrasing it in terms of rebellion, that we should be angry with what is going on in today's world and that we should rebel against it. They try to create that sense of anger and rebellion by drawing a picture of the world that leads one into despair, that implies that the only option for young people is to

contemplate suicide or to give up because there is no hope in the world. This is a very dangerous trend and actually has nothing to do with what the real sense of monastic life is. It is true that a monastic does distance himself from the world, but the motivation for his withdrawal is not one of anger or despair or how terrible the world is; rather, the withdrawal and recoiling from the world on the part of a healthy monasticism is one that is really an act of love. It is a positive move that places the emphasis not on rejecting the world but on loving God. Saint Isaac the Syrian so beautifully wrote:

You remove a man from the sight of others and thus grant him more easily to see himself, and enable him to perceive himself according to the words of one of your initiates, which is the best way to get a glimpse of angels. You cut off converse with men, and thus more genuinely enter into converse with Christ. You close the door of the outward temple, and open up the inner shrine of the heart. You bestow and instruct in the use of weapons against the passions. You collect the thoughts that are scattered. You immerse the mind in the depths of Scripture and draw up light. You discover the source of tears. You ascend to pure prayer. You teach silence, which is a mystery of the age to come (Saint Isaac the Syrian, Homilies 41&42).

It is this desire, this zeal for God and His eternal kingdom that draws one to monastic life. But what makes one person choose this path and another one not? Scripture tells us that many are called, but few are the chosen. So what it really means is that within the conscience of each of us is a love for God and for His creation and an awareness of the Resurrection and of the idea that our life is a preparation for a kingdom to come. A fifteen year-old boy wrote this poem about Easter morning:

Darkness, it seeps through me into my skeptical mind
All I hear is the quiet and silence around me.

I spy the tiny flickering glow of a sacred candle,
Far away like the beam of a lighthouse on the coast of the swallowing sea.

The light multiplies, burning brighter and brighter,
Reflecting joy in the hearts of the worshippers.
Suddenly the brilliantly white-robed priest appears through a murky cloud of incense from behind the golden screen.
He raises the candle proclaiming the time of joy throughout the world.

The choir emphatically sings the triumphant strains of hymns,
Everything is illumined, my once doubting mind is refreshed.
Christ is risen!

That poem was written by my brother, George, who made the decision not to pursue monastic life but obviously was imbued with a sense of following Christ and a desire to see the heavenly kingdom. But one person sees the flame of the Resurrection and is satisfied to live out his life in the world, and his soul is made secure simply by that occasional glimpse of the candle, of the flame of the Resurrection. But a monastic is one who desires to kindle the flame of the Resurrection on a daily basis. He hears the call of Christ in His heart and can never be satisfied enough. The words from the Psalter apply most especially to the monastic: *I am become a stranger unto mine brethren, and an alien unto the sons of my mother. For the zeal of Thy house hath eaten me up* (Ps. 68); and again, *O God, my God, unto Thee I rise early at dawn. My soul hath thirsted for Thee; how often hath my flesh longed after Thee in a land barren and untrodden and unwatered. So in Thy sanctuary have I appeared before Thee to see Thy power and Thy glory* (Ps. 62). And finally, *How beloved are Thy dwellings, O Lord of hosts; my soul*

longeth and fainteth for the courts of the Lord. For better is one day in Thy courts than thousands elsewhere (Ps. 83).

So a monastic is one who devotes his life to prayer, to conforming all the aspects of his daily life to the one thing needful -- communion with God, being always in the House of God and striving above all else to do the will of God. I am sure many of you have heard of the Optina elders who lived close to our own time. The elder Nikon of Optina described this life of a monk in a letter to his mother:

“About myself what can I write? I am alive and well, I have no particular needs, I receive everything I need, I labor a little as a secretary, I am very busy with various things in the monastery, or rather, things which touch in general on our common life: I sing on the cliros, and finally I serve, standing before the holy altar of God.

As for my inward life, my cell and my soul, not everyone can know this. My cell is five yards long and three and a half wide, with one window. This cell is dearer to me than any sumptuous houses or halls” (Russia's Catacomb Saints, p. 305).

The monastic life is a private life, but it is more than this as Nikon goes on, it is one that is striving always to do the will of God and not to be drawn away by the distractions of the world.

“Human pride says: We will do, will attain - and we begin to build a tower of Babel, we demand of God an accounting for His actions, we desire to have the universe at our disposal, we dream of thrones beyond the clouds - but no one and nothing submits to us, and the powerlessness of man is demonstrated with all apparentness in bitter experience. Observing this experience in the history both of ancient, long-gone days, and of recent times, I have come to the conclusion that the ways of God's Providence are past finding out for us; we cannot understand them, and therefore we must with all humility give ourselves over to the will of God; without the will of God nothing can happen either to me in particular or to us all in general, and therefore I am calm. And when one's soul is calm, what more can one seek?” (Russia's Catacomb Saints, p. 305).

Now of course to come to that quiet, to arrive at that state of calm, of peace, of conforming one's will to God's will requires a great battle. There is the inner battle, the striving to be cleansed of the passions. But when one has achieved, has won that victory over the passions this is where the real gift of monasticism comes in, the real reason for why the world is in such great need of monasticism today, because when victories are achieved in this battle the Grace of the Holy Spirit descends upon the monk; he becomes a vessel of the Holy Spirit and is bequeathed gifts that others will not possess. Metropolitan Anastassy was the second metropolitan of the ROCA and he wrote a book called *The Defence of Monasticism*, which mentions this point, that is, for those who give up this life in the world and draw themselves into the desert, to them will be given the gifts of raising the dead, of driving out the demons, for, as Saint John of the Ladder wrote, why else would one take on this way of life.

There is actually another reason. The point I want to make is that people ask me what I do as a monastic, and I always give in and sort of give the easy answer, almost ashamed to really discuss what the real heart of the matter is in terms of monasticism. I almost feel that I have to have this crutch, to say, "Well, we do help other people" in a literal, physical sense. I am ashamed to admit that I almost always fall prey to this, and I will say something such as, "Oh yes, in Bethany we have a school and we take care of children there," or, "We publish books," or, "We take care of the pilgrims." All that is true and

well and good, but that is not the essence of monasticism. Rather it is precisely that monks are the ones who "thanks to their isolation from the world acquire for people such spiritual treasures which cannot be provided by any other benefactor of mankind whether he be a great scholar or genius or writer or philanthropist or outstanding statesman or an economist. They bind together earth and heaven. They keep vigil over the world by their intercession before God, preserving it from the destructive effect of the elements or from the diverse waves of moral wickedness and the snares of the evil one" (*A Defence of Monasticism*, p. 66).

When a monk is cleansed, Grace abides in him, and the work of prayer -- all those hours that before were spent in church, that at times could seem tedious or onerous or were filled with the loneliness and the painful pulling away from the pleasures of the world-- now become the power of prayer, a prayer so strong that a simple bent-over man in his cell deep in the forest can influence the whole world. We can readily recall just a few examples from monastic life in the Russian tradition. Saint Sergius, a father of Russian monasticism, blessed Prince Donskoy to defend the land from the Tatars and, though he was out of sight and many miles away as the fighting raged, the holy man was praying for the soul of each particular soldier that fell in battle. In the life of Saint Seraphim of Sarov, there is a story of how during the war with Napoleon he stood in his cell that was literally ablaze with candles; he was lighting a candle for each soldier as he fell in battle. And with each candle he lit it was as if he was being offered in sacrifice, as if he too were being burned as he offered his prayer for those fallen and for their families. He did not have TV, he did not have a radio but he knew exactly what was happening there and was joined in their struggle.

Also, I encourage you all to read such publications as *Orthodox America* which offers information on lives of the Saints and an Orthodox perspective on topics of the day. In the current issue they have a story on the life of Saint Macrina, because it is also important to keep in mind that monastic life is embraced by both men and women, and the same powers are available to both. Describing the end of the life of Saint Macrina, her brother Gregory (who along with his much heralded brother Saint Basil the Great was strongly influenced by their elder sister Macrina in their spiritual life) wrote about her:

It was asked if Macrina had some new garments in readiness for her funeral. "Nothing," was the reply. "She gave everything away. Here is her hairshirt, here is her patched cassock and her ragged mantia. She kept nothing else on earth, rather she concentrated on storing treasures in heaven." He concludes his account of her life by touching upon various miracles she had wrought while still alive. He purposely does not expand upon these wonders for fear that those of weak faith might accuse him of exaggeration, so extraordinary was her power of prayer: she healed the sick, exorcised demons, and foretold future events (*Orthodox America* #141).

Of course we cannot forget our patron of this conference, Saint Herman. He was a simple monk yet he conducted his monastic life, his life of prayer on a lonely island away from his homeland and in that life of prayer he was still able to have control over both nature and the events of man. If you have read the insert that you have you know that he was able to stop the flooding of the island and to foresee the time of his own death.

It is especially important to remember when people ask us why should we embrace monasticism that today, more than ever, we need monastics. We need people experienced

in spiritual struggle, for today the world is engaged in such a strong spiritual battle - it is one that is almost becoming visible. Father Leonid talked about some of the temptations, the things that are going on in today's world that you face and that touch at the spiritual level. But even the following small anecdote shows how obvious the work of the devil is becoming in today's world.

I was taking a bus up to Jordanville last week, and as I was sitting in the bus station one young man was walking by and he had a black football sweatshirt on but it did not have the name of Dan Marino or anyone like that. It was a black shirt with red numerals - 666 - on the chest and sleeves and on the back it said BEELZEBUB, and a satanic symbol as well on the back. It is almost as they said in the early days, that is, that in the last days the demons will be walking around barefaced, and we are literally seeing that today. So I think that it is very important to realize that we also need people, however weak we may be in our spiritual life, who are at least making the effort to engage ourselves in the spiritual battle, especially in terms of monastic life, and trying to emulate the monastics of the past.

Those are some of my thoughts. I just want to say that my prayer for each of you is that, whatever course you take in life, may you be guided by a living faith in the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ and strive always to do His will. May God bless you and guide you to His eternal Kingdom.

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