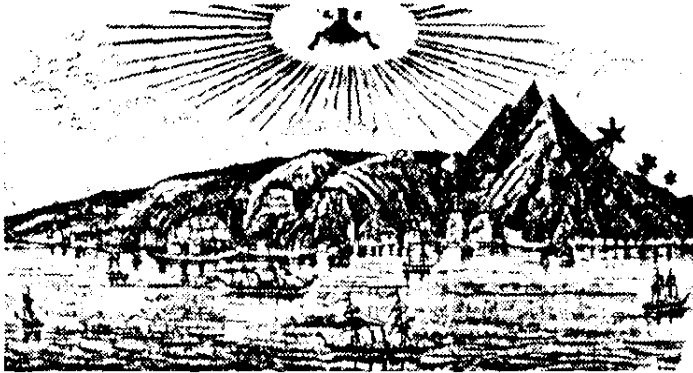


Monasticism- The Apostolic Life



from the Presentation by the Very Reverend Abbott of St. Anthony's Monastery, Archimandrite Paisios, to the San Francisco Diocese clergy conference at St. Anthony's Greek Orthodox Monastery in Florence, Arizona. Spring 1998.

Many Christians during the first centuries of the Church were moved by a holy zeal to forsake the world and distribute almost all their belongings to the poor or to a common treasury, and then lived a secluded life, praying and reading the Holy Scriptures. They usually lived not far from their own families. By doing handicrafts, they earned what they needed for their basic living necessities. They distributed the little money that was left over to the poor.

These people were called "ascetics." This way of life developed even more during the following years, and from this mode of living the monastic life was born. Women who wanted and desired to dedicate themselves completely to God confessed before witnesses that they desired a life of virginity and thenceforth lived-in the beginning-with their parents, who provided for their livelihood. Later it was customary for the virgins to live together in "Parthenons," houses for virgins, that is. In the fourth century, St. Pachomios the Great organized monasticism for women more perfectly and founded many monasteries for men and many for women.

The monastic life was called the "apostolic life" in the ancient church. It imitated - and still imitates - the life of the first Christians, who lived under the direct or indirect spiritual direction of the Apostles. In essence, it is a life of repentance and purification of the heart from our passions, while fulfilling the commandments of the Lord. The beatitudes of the Lord find their fulfillment in monasticism, and more generally in ascesis, just as in the time of the ancient church.

The ascetical life of the monasteries is just like the ascetical life of the first Christians. We find in the Acts of the Apostles that the faithful "continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers... All who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. Continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food..." (Acts

2:42-46) And later we find another similar testimony: "The multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common." (Acts 4:32)

Sozomenos writes in the Ecclesiastical History that the Jews who became Christians led a philosophical life, as he called it - their way of life was just as we see it organized today, says Sozomenos, by the Egyptian monks. They imitated as much as they could the Prophet Elias and St. John the Baptist. "They forsake belongings, relatives, friends; they live outside of the city in sacred houses called monasteries, in which they conduct august sacraments and worship God day and night. They do not eat before sunset, or they eat once every three or more days. They abstain from meat and wine. There are old virgins living with them. ..." We see that asceticism was never limited only to men.

In an account of St. Justin the Philosopher, in the second half of the second century, the saint describes the life of the Christians, which is similar to that of the first Christians: "We bring whatever we have to the common treasury and we distribute it to whomever is in need." Their spiritual life was such that, according to St. Justin, they would not even contract marriages, except for the sake of raising children, or they would set aside marriage to keep complete continence. In other words, the monastic way of life, according to the saint, was a normal phenomenon.

The Lord's words, "All cannot accept this saying, but only those to whom it has been given," were actually meant

to help his disciples strive for a life of celibacy. Thus, according to St. John Chrysostom, the Lord presents the issue of not marrying as a great and significant achievement in order to attract them and exhort them, since the Lord wanted to inspire the desire for celibacy in them.

Then, to show the possibility of virginity, He said, "There are eunuchs who were born thus from their mother's womb, and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake," that is, they destroyed the evil thoughts and purified their heart. In this way He led them with these words to prefer celibacy, as St. John says.

Celibacy existed in the beginning of the creation of Adam and Eve. St. John Chrysostom describes the life of Adam and Eve in his eighteenth homily on the Book of Genesis: "At the outset and from the beginning, the practice of virginity was in force. However, when due to their indifference they disobeyed and sin began, that lifestyle was taken away.

Also in his work On Virginity, he describes the life of Adam and Eve saying: "It was deemed necessary for him to have a helpmate, and it came to be, yet not even in this manner was marriage considered necessary. It did not even appear, for they lived without marriage, abiding in paradise as if in heaven, and enjoyed the pleasure of associating with God.... Thus did they live in that place, adorned with virginity." So it was natural for Adam and Eve to live in virginity and in continuous communion with God, since, as St. Nicholas Cabasilas says, "Adam and Eve were created in

the image of the Incarnate God the Logos. Christ was the archetype. The old Adam was not the prototype for the New, but the New Adam was the prototype for the old. St. Gregory Palamas and St. Maximos the Confessor say exactly the same thing. In this monastic life, the life of celibacy, mankind has its beginning. Therefore, monasticism is not something foreign to the church; it is not something that began much later. Celibacy is the life that Christ, the Prototype of the old Adam, wanted mankind to live.

When the Church was besieged by blasphemous heresies, the monks and nuns greatly contributed to fight against them. They fought against and hated the dogmas of the heretics, but sincerely loved the heretics. With sincere love in imitation of Christ they brought the heretics back to the bosom of the Church. The sacrament of communion was the final, the crowning stage of the heretics' return to the Church. However, without the complete rejection of the heresy, this was impossible. Their confession of faith in the decisions of the Ecumenical Councils was considered a basic prerequisite of the expression of the orthodoxy of the monks. The catholicity of the Church during the era of the Ecumenical Councils is lived in the eucharistic assembly with obedience to a bishop, as well as through the unconditional acceptance of the decisions of the Ecumenical Councils. The voice of the infallible Church is expressed both through the Ecumenical Councils and through the other regional councils, whose authority is acknowledged by the universal church's conscience.

The champions of these decisions were the monks

distinguished for their orthodox faith. Since heresy appeared as a threat to the unity of the Church, the bishops, being responsible for their flock, sought the help of spiritual men to confront the heresies. St. Anthony the Great was summoned from his mountain by the bishops many times to help confront the Arians. St. Makarios was called upon by a bishop to help him against Ierakitos. The nun Melani was active in Palestine. Besides all the other public welfare institutions and women's and men's monasteries she founded, she brought about 400 schismatics back to Orthodoxy, who belonged to the sect of the Meletians. Likewise, she worked with other spiritual men to bring all the Spirit-fighting heretics of her area back to the Church. In the book of Barsanuphios and John, the faith in the Ecumenical Councils is praised and extolled. In Palestine, St. Eftymios and St. Symeon the Stylite brought Evdokia back from the anti-chalcedonian heresy of Dioscoros to the Universal Church. And along with her, a multitude of people deceived by Theodosios returned to the Orthodox Church.

The confessors of the Orthodox Church Sts. Savvas and Theodosios the Abbot also engaged in similar struggles. St. Savvas not only anathematized the leaders of heresies - Eutuches, Nestor, and Severos - but also "supported" the Council of Chalcedon. Countless other monks struggled for the authority of the Ecumenical Councils and against the heresies. Not only did monks and hieromonks struggle for them, but they also took part in the Ecumenical Councils. In particular, in the Seventh Ecumenical Council, out of the 350 Orthodox Fathers, 136 were abbots and monks.

Even the emperors themselves believed in the positive role of the monks to bring back those who had gone astray from the Church, "which is one." The letters of the emperor Marcian to the Fathers of Sinai which exhort them against Theodosios the heretic, show the conviction of the emperor that the peace of the church and the return to her of those who have gone astray was possible through the sound advice and support of the monastics.

The ascetic monastic fathers of the desert, having traversed the path of their spiritual journey free of deception, that is, by passing from the purification of their soul, and progressing to illumination and theosis, in other words to the state of beholding God, to the true theology of our Church, were able to present the truth successfully against errors.



Our Church honors marriage in Christ as well as virginity in Christ. So when a monk or nun criticizes or despises marriage, he shows that he does not have an ecclesiastical mind-set (phronema), since he criticizes something that the Church blesses. A true monk never criticizes the blessed state of marriage. And of course a married person should not criticize monasticism because this also shows a lack of an ecclesiastical mind-set (phronema). Divine Grace is acquired by the monk with virginity in

Christ, while by the layman with a marriage in Christ. But in either case, a struggle, ascesis, is required, according to Orthodox teaching.

St. John Chrysostom teaches: "Those who live in the world, even though they are married, ought to resemble the monks in all ways." "You are greatly deceived if you think that there are things that are required of laymen and other things of monks.... All are equally accountable." St. Basil the Great says in his Ascetical Works: "Submission to the Gospel is required for all men, both for monks and for laymen.

How much, and to what degree must each and every person apply himself in order to attain salvation? According to Father Justin Popovitch, "all of God and all of man, nothing less. It is not measured by just how much is needed and who gives more, but God gives all of Himself and man must give all of himself, and in this consists salvation." And this again applies to monks as well as laymen.

Monasticism expresses the apostolic life of the ancient Church as the continuation of that church. It is the heart of the Church. But because the world does not provide the capability for people to live in it evangelically to the degree that many would want to, they withdraw from the world, aflame with a divine inspiration, which for several people is uncontrollable, for even in their sleep they keep the commandments of the Lord. They withdraw from the world not out of self-love or cowardice or to avoid assuming worldly responsibilities, but out of a purely holy desire to be freed of their passions and that their heart be cleansed, so that they be united with Him Whom they yearn for.

"A monk," according to St. Nilus of Sinai, "is he who, withdrawing from all men, is united with all men. A monk is he who regards himself as existing with all men and sees himself in each man. The more a monk overcomes the world, the brighter shines his grace-filled rays and the greater the number of people who can be warmed and illumined by them. From his isolated cell, he sees deeper and becomes familiar with his fellow human beings and grows far closer to them in heart than is possible for those living in the world, for he sees them all and is united with them in God."

Monasticism is similar to the first apostolic parishes, not only in their common belongings and common daily prayers, but primarily in their common therapeutic treatment. In the ancient church, the catechumen would pass through the stage of purification, would be enlightened in Holy Baptism, and would even reach theosis. In a similar fashion, a novice monk struggles in the stage of purification and repentance, as the catechumen would, and when his repentance is completed, he enters the stage of enlightenment with the "Second Baptism" which he receives, that is, in his tonsure, and then by the grace of God, he proceeds, if God wills it, towards theosis. If we study Orthodox Monasticism, we would understand how the first apostolic parishes functioned.

The parish life can be inspired by the monastic life. "Angels are a light for monastics, and the monastics are a light for laymen," according to St. John of Sinai. The

monastery reminds the faithful that the commandments of the Lord are common, they apply to all. It drives them on towards new spiritual struggles. Some even experience a spiritual rebirth, according to just how receptive they are to the Grace of the Holy Spirit.

The monastery is a clinic, in precisely the same way that the first apostolic parishes were. The uncreated grace of God perfects man. Once man achieves the healing of his soul, he lives the tradition of our Church; he becomes a part of that stream of living Tradition; he becomes a bearer of Tradition. When the great Fathers of the Church, who were for the most part monks, spoke about purification, illumination, and theosis, they spoke as ones with the experience of the uncreated light; they lived this reality, they lived this tradition of the Church, they lived Orthodoxy. And Orthodoxy, according to Father Justin Popovitch, is: "life and experience of grace, and through this grace, knowledge of God and men."

The monks, and all Christians, who are cleansed of their passions, find the cure of their soul become the most social of people. And since they themselves have found interior peace and perceptibly know what it means to be a temple of the Holy Spirit, they are able to guide others as well towards the purification of their soul. Spiritual guides are not limited merely to the clergy or to the monks and nuns, but all clergy and laity, married and celibate, men and women are able to guide souls towards perfection if they themselves have been purified of their passions and have attained the state of enlightenment. Or even if they are still in the stage of the

purification of their soul, they are able to help.

The love that one has towards monasticism, towards the apostolic life, is proof that one lives Orthodox tradition. It is love towards the essence itself of Orthodoxy, and this is why all the saints loved asceticism.

The ascetical life is our effort assisted by the Grace of God to apply the commandments of Christ. As St. Gregory Palamas has said, "Asceticism is primarily the evangelical life which is based on repentance. It is man's preparation for his union with Christ. The commandments of the Lord are directed to all, married and celibate, without exception. The only difference is that monks pursue the more perfect application, according to the words of the Lord, 'If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and come and follow me.'

"Asceticism along with repentance requires bodily effort. As Abba Isaac the Syrian says, 'The nous is not glorified with Jesus Christ if the body does not suffer for Christ.'" When by means of an ascetical life man is united with Christ, or at least is progressing towards this communion and union, then he is able to see within himself how the achievement of the image and likeness of God is brought about. When man struggles, he simply shows his good intentions to God, and it is the uncreated grace that performs the ineffable union.

When a monk, or a Christian, lives properly, that is, when he progresses spiritually and passes through purification and attains enlightenment, and progresses in accordance with the will of God towards theosis, then he lives Pentecost. He comes into direct contact with Christ through His uncreated energies, which has an impact on the

whole world, for a person's spiritual rebirth, as the Fathers of the Church understand it and as it is lived primarily in monasticism, is noticed by all of creation. He effectively benefits all of creation. His teaching, his life, his behavior, his entire spiritual world are all different. He reflects the eternal life, the new life that Christ brought to the world. This new man is what we, too, are called to live in order to see in practice the difference between the genuine Orthodox Christian and the life of a worldly man.



The transfiguration of each soul takes place also with constant repentance. In beginning His work to save the world, the Lord preached repentance.

A monk, through constant repentance renews his baptism. According to St. John of the Ladder, the tears of repentance are a second baptism, a reconciliation with the Lord, and a purification of the conscience. According to St. Isaac, the fruit of the inner man begins with tears. This is why tears are a sign of true repentance, and they are required of all Christians. But there are also other kinds of tears. According to St. Isaac, there is "an order of tears which belongs to him who sheds tears unceasingly both night and

day The eyes of such a man become like fountains of water for two years' time or even more. But afterwards he enters into peace of thought and purity of heart. And once he enters into it, it shall abide with him till death. And God raises up the fruit of the Spirit in him. And in this present life he perceives, dimly somehow, and in a figure, as it were, the change nature is going to receive at the renewal of all things." This marks the completion of the heart's purification process.

The saints of our Church know that divine Grace abides in and transfigures our soul with a desire for struggling, with humility - which is the basis and foundation of the virtues - with watchfulness, and with prayer.

The prayer which the monk uses above all, more than all the other prayers of the Church is the so-called Jesus prayer, "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me." It has tremendous power when it is used constantly and with zeal, and primarily when it is used under the super-vision of an elder who possesses this prayer, that is, who has experience of how it acts in the soul of a person. The Jesus prayer contains a confession of the Godman and a confession of our sinfulness. In this combination of these two truths lies the whole spirit of our Orthodoxy. With time, the Jesus prayer guides us towards Christ-like humility, which, according to St. Maximos, guides us to the two-fold knowledge: the knowledge of the omnipotence of Christ and the knowledge of our own weakness. The ignorance of the omnipotence of Christ and the ignorance of our own weakness constitute pride.

The Jesus prayer purifies the nous of thoughts and fantasy, an indispensable prerequisite without which man does not achieve the knowledge of the truth, the knowledge of God, in other words, does not fulfill his purpose as a

Christian. As St. John Chrysostom says, this prayer illuminates man with uncreated light. 'Prayer done with zeal is light for the nous and soul... It is an unquenchable and continuous light. However, it is not achieved without labor and temptations. In fact, according to St. Isaac the Syrian, "Reckon every prayer, wherein the body does not toil and the heart is not afflicted, to be a miscarriage."

When prayer, and in particular the Jesus prayer, is done with zeal and persistence and under obedience, it brings man to "true knowledge of God, it is an intercessor between God and men, a physician of the passions, an antidote for illnesses, peace of soul, a guide that leads to heaven, it is communion and union with God. And man's soul is directed towards God, enlightened, and is thoroughly brightened by His indescribable light." The monk constantly strives to occupy himself with prayer and mainly with the Jesus prayer, lest he be found unworthy of this divine conversation and end up spiritually lifeless and dead. For the Jesus prayer to purify the soul of man, it must be said without ceasing. This work is not only for monks. Praying without ceasing is for all Christians, according to the Apostle Paul. St. Gregory Palamas as Archbishop of Thessaloniki taught the same thing, that ceaseless prayer, the Jesus prayer, is not only for monks, but for all Christians, as well. But for man to make progress in the Jesus prayer, stillness and seclusion are indispensable aids.

In the Gospel, the Lord often went out into the wilderness to pray. "Why did he ascend the mountain?" asks St. John Chrysostom. And he answers, 'In order to teach us that solitude and isolation are good things, when we want to come into contact with God. The wilderness is the mother of hesychia, and it keeps us far from all noise.

All the hours of the day are appropriate for prayer, but

the nighttime hours are most suitable. The night has darkness and quiet, essential aids for the execution of prayer. This is why monks prefer the nighttime hours for noetic prayer and their communication with God. The wilderness has shown forth tens of thousands of saints of our Church.

The monk gives priority to the person. Asceticism delivers him from thoughts, the imagination, and the passions, and by the grace of God he acquires peace and becomes a fountain of peace for all the world. "Find peace within yourself," says St. Seraphim of Sarov, "and thousands all around you will be saved." He means here not just those who come into contact face to face with such a person, but also those far away are changed and become partakers of the grace of such a saint, and turn towards God. This is why today the world needs such people more than ever before.

"Perhaps," St. Silouan writes, "you will say that nowadays there are no monks who would pray for the whole world; but I tell you that when there are no men of prayer on the earth, the world will come to an end and great calamities will befall: they have started already."

External stillness must be accompanied with interior stillness. The beginning of the development of the passions and of one's fall is thoughts, which proceed from a soul disciple, in proportion to the faith and obedience he has towards his elder, a recipient of the uncreated energies of God, through his spiritual father.

"He who has cut off his self-will and put himself under obedience in all things to his elder and his confessor has an unfettered mind... and obedience brings him all the virtues and gifts one by one. He who has true obedience fulfills all the commandments and becomes like Christ who was 'obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.' The Holy

Spirit loves the obedient soul," according to St. Silouan, "and quickly comes to know the Lord, and obtains prayer of the heart.... And thus God gives His wisdom and anything else the obedient soul asks of Him."



The Church today, the world, is passing through a very serious crisis, a crisis both moral and spiritual. The problem in the world today is man—the individual. If man by means of asceticism purifies his nous from thoughts and fantasies, and then his heart from the passions, then the Grace of the Holy Spirit comes permanently to his soul, and in this manner he becomes at peace with himself and with God. He comes into contact with God and is at peace with his fellow man and with all of creation. The achievement of one soul being cured of his passions means a positive change to all of society, it is a beginning of the cure of all of society. This is primarily what monasticism—the apostolic life—has offered and continues to offer to the Church throughout its history, either by word or through silence, to those who draw near.

