

M O N A S T I C I S M

THE BIBLICAL CALL ●



By a Nun of the Orthodox Monastery of the Transfiguration

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Are you aware that there is a direct connection between the monastic life and the teaching of the Holy Scriptures? Many are not, and in fact some Christians believe that monasticism is either unbiblical, or at best has no relationship with the spirituality and thought of the Old or New Testaments. My first awareness of this connection came during my visits to our monastery in Ellwood City, Pennsylvania, before I entered as a nun.

The abbess at that time, Mother Benedicta, frequently referred to the passage about the rich young man who approached Christ with the question, "Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?" (Matthew 19:16). Christ told him, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me" (Matthew 19:21). This was the same Gospel reading which our holy father Saint Anthony the Great (fourth century) heard one Sunday as a young man. By it he was inspired to set the affairs of his life in order and go to the desert to become a monk.

Another Gospel passage to which Mother Benedicta frequently referred was, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head" (Matthew 8:20). She told us that in the monastic life we own nothing and must serve wherever God needs us, "For here we have no continuing city, but we seek the one to come" (Hebrews 13:14). When she sensed that potential novices were postponing a decision to embark upon the monastic life, she reminded them of the story of the man who wanted to follow Christ after he buried his father. But Christ said, "Follow Me, and let the dead bury their own dead" (Matthew 8:22).

BIBLICAL MODELS FOR MONASTIC LIFE

After becoming a nun, I realized just how many Scriptural figures are relevant to monastic life. Take, for instance, Saint John the Baptist. As I see streams of visitors come to our monastery, I am frequently reminded of what Christ asked concerning Saint John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to behold?" (Luke 7:24). There is really nothing to "see" in a monastery. It is true that a

monastery may have beautiful or ancient icons or impressive buildings, but essentially there is nothing to see. Monastics live a simple life like Saint John the Baptist. We eat simple food, dress in simple clothing, and often live apart from the crowds. This is why Saint John is often cited as a type or model for monastic life, as is the Prophet Elijah, the Old Testament "parallel" to Saint John, who also rejected worldly values and spent time alone with God in the desert.

The Mother of God herself is also a model for monastics. According to Church Tradition based on the Protoevangelium of Saint James (first or second century), she spent the early part of her life in the Temple; during those years, she lived very much as monastics live—or actually, monastics try to do what she did: pray, fast, work, study the Holy Scriptures, and live chastely in the remembrance of God. The Feast of her Presentation in the Temple (November 21) is celebrated with joy and festivity in monasteries, and it is a feast often chosen for the celebration of monastic tonsure, that service in which a monk or nun takes vows and promises to dedicate his or her life to God.

The communal aspect of monastic life is exemplified by the Holy Apostles, who left everything to follow Christ and who formed a spiritual family with Christ as its leader; for in the community which constitutes a monastery all is held in common and the members have as their head an abbot or abbess who represents Christ in their midst. Indeed, in the early Church not only the Apostles but the whole "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). Similarly, the Myrrhbearing women, who followed Christ and "provided for Him from their substance" (Luke 8:3), are another Biblical prototype of the monastic vocation.

CHRIST'S COMMANDS—THE MONASTIC RESPONSE

The monastic life has developed within the Church as a response to many Scriptural injunctions. For example:

...do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?... But

seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you (Matthew 6:25, 33).

In the monastic life, we seek first the Kingdom of God by leaving worldly affairs and living for God in the monastery. This is done primarily by conducting the daily liturgical services prescribed by the Church, following the example of King David, who sang, "Praise the Lord, O my soul! While I live I will praise the Lord; I will sing praises to my God while I have my being" (Psalm 146:1, 2), and the Apostles, who after the Lord's Ascension "were continually in the temple praising and blessing God" (Luke 24:53). These prayers are offered on behalf of the whole world, and as we are faithful to our calling of prayer, God provides our material sustenance. Of course, monastics must work in order to eat (*cf.* II Thessalonians 3:10), but we see daily how God does provide.

We try also to fulfill the teaching of Saint Paul to "pray without ceasing" (I Thessalonians 5:17) by keeping a spirit of prayer even outside the Church, seeking to find God in our hearts, mindful of the word of Christ, "the kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:21). One of the main ways of doing this is by saying the Jesus Prayer, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner." This prayer, which has been passed down from the earliest years of the Church, is itself based on the prayers of the publican, "God be merciful to me a sinner!" (Luke 18:13), and blind Bartimaeus, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" (Mark 10:47).

The monastic life is also a direct response to one of Christ's hardest sayings: "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:26). Of course, we do not withdraw from our families because we despise them, but because we take seriously Christ's call to put Him first in our life; we desire to grow in single-minded love for God, committing our whole lives to Him. Nevertheless, when one makes a decision to become a monk or nun, it is quite common to meet objections from friends or family. The stark truth of Christ's familiar warning quickly becomes apparent to many a novice:

Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to "set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law." And "a man's foes will be those of his own household." 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. . . (Matthew 10:34-37).

These conflicts on the threshold of the monastery are but the beginning of the cross a novice will be taking up, responding in a very radical way to the words of Christ: "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for My sake will find it" (Matthew 16:24-25).

The monastic is called to the full-time labor of losing his life in order to save it. Part of this process involves the shedding of our false personality, our pride and the images of ourselves we present to others and to God, through the practice of obedience. In our efforts to learn

obedience we follow Christ, who "humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross" (Philippians 2:8); we strive to be able to say with Him, "I do not seek not My own will but the will of the Father who sent Me" (John 5:30).

The monastic's commitment to celibacy is another direct response to a call recorded in Holy Scripture. Jesus spoke of those "who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake" (Matthew 19:12). "He who is able to accept it," said the Savior, "let him accept it" (v. 12). Saint Paul offers a beautiful commentary on this seemingly severe saying in his first letter to the Corinthians:

But I want you to be without care. He who is unmarried cares for the things that belong to the Lord—how to please the Lord. But he who is married cares about the things of the world—how he may please his wife. There is a difference between a wife and a virgin. The unmarried woman cares about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in spirit. But she who is married cares about the things of the world—how she may please her husband (I Corinthians 7: 32-34).

Elsewhere Saint Paul says, ". . . present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. . ." (Romans 12:1-2). One of the main spiritual efforts of the monk or nun is to follow the teachings of the Holy Fathers concerning the guarding of the heart and mind, "bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ" (I Corinthians 10:5). Chastity involves the whole being, not just the body, that there might be "truth in the inward parts" (Psalm 51:6). In this "we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but. . . against the rulers of the darkness of this age" (Ephesians 6:12).

LIFE ACCORDING TO THE GOSPEL

Saint Basil the Great wrote that monastic life is, quite simply, "life according to the Gospel." All Christians must, of course, strive to live according to the Gospel, fulfilling the Biblical commands, which are given to all. Each of us can and should try to do so wherever we may be. Some, however, have the blessed desire and opportunity not to divide their interests, but to be wholly devoted to the affairs of the Lord. For them, monastic life offers a real possibility to live according to their deepest, God-given desires: to follow Christ, to serve Him, and to take upon themselves His yoke (Matthew 11:29-30), which is truly easy to those who love Him. ■

The Orthodox Monastery of the Transfiguration is located in Ellwood City, Pennsylvania, approximately one hour north of Pittsburgh. The monastery was founded in 1967 and is under the jurisdiction of the Orthodox Church in America. The current abess is the V. Rev. Mother Christophora. In addition to offering the daily liturgical services, the monastery also offers guest facilities for both clergy and lay people and conducts retreats and conferences, upon request, throughout the country. *Life Transfigured*, a monastic journal, is published three times a year by the sisterhood, and is sent to interested subscribers, free of charge. For more information, write: The Orthodox Monastery of the Transfiguration, RD #1, Box 184x, Ellwood City, PA 16117.