

The Monastic Life

by Archbishop Chrysostomos

The speaker defends Orthodox monasticism against misunderstandings and critiques Abbot Laurence's article, emphasizing the importance of fidelity to the typikon and the search for salvation.

Scripture: Matthew 23:3, Philippians 2:3, Colossians 3:23, 1 Timothy 4:8, James 1:22

Topics: "Monastic Life", "Spiritual Growth"

Description

Archbishop Chrysostomos addresses the misunderstandings and challenges presented by Abbot Laurence regarding Orthodox monasticism, emphasizing the importance of traditional practices and the true essence of monastic life. He highlights the dangers of focusing on external appearances and superficial practices rather than the internal transformation and spiritual growth that monasticism should cultivate. Archbishop Chrysostomos defends the Prayer of Jesus as a central aspect of Orthodox monasticism, refuting accusations of idolatry and emphasizing its profound spiritual significance. He also stresses the significance of obedience, simplicity, and humility in the monastic life, contrasting it with the misconceptions and misinterpretations presented by Abbot Laurence.

Transcript

Hieromonk Laurence, Abbot of the Monastery of New Skete, a former Byzantine Catholic monastic institution now under the jurisdiction of the modernist Orthodox Church in America, presented the readers of The Greek Orthodox Theological Review with some surprising comments about Orthodox monasticism in his article, "Orthodox Monasticism Today: Some Reflections," which appeared in the Fall issue for 1987 (vol. 32, no. 3). His article is the text of an address delivered, along with other talks on the subject of Orthodox monasticism, at a conference held on the campus of the Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology. It is my understanding that the texts of the other addresses presented will also appear in the pages of The Greek Orthodox Theological Review, and I am certain that they will both challenge and take exception to much of what Abbot Laurence has written. I, however, would like to direct a few words of guidance to the readers of this article from the perspective of a rather strict and traditional monastic, hoping that my comments will counteract some of the erroneous notions that its author puts forth.

I will begin my few comments by noting that it is neither my business nor my intention to judge the monastic life of Abbot Laurence. I neither know him nor much of the monastic community which he leads. I wish simply to address myself to certain misunderstandings in what he writes of the Orthodox monastic life, allowing that these may not, in fact, affect his personal spiritual life, which again is unknown to me and

not properly my concern. I am concerned here about the effect of his misunderstandings on those who might be misled by them in their understanding of the traditional form of monasticism which has survived through the ages in the Orthodox Church. Too often, today, the failures or foibles of monastics are put forth with fervor before the body of believers, while the far greater number of successful and dedicated monastics fade into oblivion. The monk who falls to the flesh, for example, is of greater interest--and far better known--than the countless number of his brothers who conquer the flesh. In such an atmosphere, the kinds of misunderstandings that we find in Father Laurence's comments about Orthodox monasticism are particularly harmful to the Faithful.

There are many things in the Abbot's article which are worthy of note. I will not comment on these. Rather, I will comment on a specific paragraph in the article, reproduced below, which seems to represent and summarize the misunderstandings of monasticism to which I have referred. He writes:

Throughout the Church, whether here or abroad, monastic life is imprisoned by nominalism and reductionism not unlike the trap that ensnares so much Protestantism through its literalism and fundamentalism. The spiritual life encouraged and practiced is itself a form of idolatry: the Jesus prayer is flaunted along with prayer ropes, and this is passed off as hesychasm. Monks and nuns are perpetually concerned with what they will or will not eat, what they will wear, and what typikon they will follow, but little concern seems to be spent on how they will save their souls. Our clothing has long enjoyed a life of its own, disproving the age-old dictum that the habit doesn't make the monk. Though we notice that some of those who love to parade in monastic garb do not hesitate at times to exchange this garb for the most fashionable of street clothes and jewelry to be worn in all kinds of non-monastic settings. Others are into all kinds of extreme ascetic practices such as minimum sleep and nourishment, and these extraordinary and stressful conditions bring on hallucinatory reactions that we then proceed to label as mystical experiences of God and his saints. The whole of life is more and more a matter of externals and superstitions we are unwilling to part with.

Now, I have visited or lived in monasteries in the United States, Greece, Romania, Serbia, Great Britain, France, and Bulgaria--all Orthodox institutions, and many ancient. Some I found healthy and flourishing. Others I found lax and apparently moribund. In some I found remarkable human beings. In some I found simple, but pious believers. In some I found individuals so free of common sin that one could rightly call them "angels on earth." In others I found repentant sinners, some repenting even of the most serious falls from their monastic vows, yet angelic in their obvious desire to be lifted above the clay and mire in which they had wallowed. Indeed, I have probably seen more monasteries and met more monastics than most. In all of these travels, "whether here or abroad," I know of almost no instances in which I encountered literalism and fundamentalism, if only because the very commitment to Orthodox monasticism is a commitment to the philosophical life--and to a philosophical life sophisticated enough not to equate the technical philosophies of "nominalism" and "reductionism" with "literalism" and "fundamentalism," an equation which is both superficial and incorrect.

Most Orthodox monasticism is centered on the Prayer of Jesus. As the Fathers tell us, this prayer is a "Gospel in miniature." The extent to which its use or even misuse, for that matter, borders on idolatry is indeed in the eye of the observer. And the critical factor of differentiation in that observer's eye is most certainly his understanding of the Gospel message. Basic kerygma begins in the Gospels, and their exhortation rises, according to Orthodox teaching, above the power of the letter and touches the spirit. If we accept this understanding, the Prayer of Jesus touches the heart, activates it, and transforms it; and this not by intellectual perception alone, not by the power of intuitive faculties alone, but within the very

power of the Christ, Who is the Gospel in form and in flesh. This understanding assuredly has not the remotest connections with nominalism, nor is it literalistic or reductionist. And to be sure, it is not idolatrous, unless one means by idolatry something foreign to the lexicon of the Fathers and of the Christian message.

That the use of the prayer rope in reciting the Prayer of Jesus is not hesychasm hardly needs saying. In fact, the accusation shows a serious misunderstanding of the nexus between praxis and theoria and a gross misunderstanding of the levels of growth by which something elementary is elevated to something profound and spontaneous. An ascent in the spirit begins with some mundane and seemingly external actions, just as flight begins with activity tied to the ground. It is not within the realm of the fair and objective to make light of beginnings by pointing out that they lack the qualities of ends. Nor can one judge the inner life of even the most apparently inexperienced monastic by observing how he uses or misuses the prayer rope. Spiritual life is always hidden and always rises above such casual criteria.

Most monastics are imitators of Christ. Like Christ, they fast. Like Christ, they live the life of poverty, both in what they wear and what they possess. They do, therefore, spend time thinking about food and clothing, but this in the strange sense of thinking how best not to think of these. They are careful not to eat that which invites gluttony or attachment to food, but to partake of the "daily bread" that provides for sustenance. They are worried about clothing that might move them away from the hem of the Savior's garment, which we all touch, entreating Christ to clothe them in His righteousness. And all of this monastics do for the very purpose of salvation. It is precisely the search for salvation which prompts them to be concerned about such things.

As Christ was obedient, so, too, the monastic is obedient. While some converts enter into the Orthodox monastic life wishing to reform the services and to discard this or that "typikon," most Orthodox monastics follow the typikon of their monastic superiors, linking themselves to an on-going succession of spiritual power that affects, indeed, the roots of salvation itself. Fidelity to a typikon and care for its preservation should not, therefore, be mistaken as something other than a concern for salvation or, at least, the path towards salvation. Rather, one should fear those who misunderstand this kind of obedience and who bring into the Church a spirit of reform and a concern for "relevance"--things engendered by a pitiable lack of experience with the living power that is transmitted through care for the typika, or paths, on which our forefathers have walked to Paradise.

The Canons of the Church forbid clergy to adorn themselves, allowing even for the excommunication of those who style their hair, wear rich silk garments, or shave their faces for the purpose of looking better or more stylish. The austere garb which Canons appoint to nuns and monks is designed, likewise, to avoid vanity and worldliness. It may be that some monastics dress up in their habits in order to impress others, and then sport the dress of stylish laymen in various non-monastic settings. If this is so, these "monastics" have failed to comprehend the meaning of the habit. We wear simple black clothing to pronounce that we are dead to the world and to its notions of fashion. We cover ourselves completely to obscure the fallen body and to take on the purity and dignity appropriate to our bodies when they are kept pure and unspotted. The very purpose of our habits is to keep us away from non-monastic settings. To deride the habit, then, because some misuse it is not a very logical thing, unless such derision is meant somehow, in a bit of chicanery which is unbecoming good Christians, to condemn something worthy by emphasizing its unworthy misuse. We true monastics walk, talk, eat, and sleep in our habits, never remove them, and use them to safeguard our being in "non-monastic settings." Our clothes thus make us. They make us careful, wary, cautious, and continuously aware of our calling.

Too much sleep and too much nourishment lead to lethargy, poor health, and inattention to things spiritual. So the Fathers teach us. Fasting and a life which limits sleep to that absolutely necessary for the regeneration of the body lead to a state of spiritual watchfulness and attentiveness. So the Fathers teach us. Modern psychology tells us that excessive amounts of sleep lead to mental inactivity. Modern medicine teaches us that excessive food leads to many diseases, such as cancer and heart ailments. All of this is consistent with the teachings of the Fathers. Modern psychology tells us that excessive sleep deprivation leads to mental disorientation. The Fathers teach that it leads to spiritual delusion. Modern medicine tells us that states of near-starvation can evoke hallucinations. The Fathers warn spiritual aspirants, and especially neophytes, that excessive fasting can lead to fantasies. Modern psychology and medicine and the teachings of the Fathers, therefore, are in full accord. They do not disagree. How, then, can one seriously consider the accusation that the control of food and sleep suggested by the Fathers of the Church is naive and leads to hallucinations? The Fathers of the Church teach just what modern medicine does: that too little or too much sleep, and that too little or too much food are dangerous. In his accusations against traditional monastic practice, Father Laurence reveals a deep misunderstanding of real Orthodox monastic practice and a rather sorry lack of reading in the ascetic literature of the Church. His mistake leads to a statement about hesychasm which is unfounded and so provocative, that we might just leave the matter where it is.

Orthodox monastic life involves a system which contemporary psychologists call a "feed-back loop." By attention to externals, we affect internals; and by the restored internal state, external attributes are affected. Endlessly linked to one another, internals and externals interact with one another to the point that they are no longer separate. The humble spirit manifests itself in the humble face; the sweet countenance in the sweetness of spirit; and the contrite heart within a contrite act. Grace brings what is inside out and what is outside in. Grace molds, blends, and transforms. And if to the naive and un-seeing spirit this seems to be a process that rises out of superstition, then it is the kind of superstition that makes planes fly and radios speak.

With all due respect to Abbot Laurence, there are those of us who hold to Orthodox monasticism as a greedy man holds to a rich gem. We know its worth. We have scratched it across the glass of life, and it has made a deep and lasting imprint. We will not let it go, for, to quote the monk Evagrius, it is a "sweet life." We can only lament the bitterness of those who fail to know that sweetness. I would call the Faithful to join in that lamentation and to resist being pulled away into doubt or misbelief about the monastic life by those who improperly understand it.

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