

Orthodox Christian Monasticism Part II

The innermost spiritual sense of Orthodox Monasticism is revealed in joyful mourning (gr. harmolipi). 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.)



Gracanica Monastery, Kosovo-Serbia, - a nun in prayer

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.



**Like a fortress on its centuries long sentry
Monastery of Simonopetra Mount Athos - Greece**

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.



Serbian Monastery Hilandar - Mount Athos

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.



An Orthodox church on Santorini island, Greece

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 to 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.



A call to pray

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.



St. Naum Monastery at Ochrid Lake, FYR Macedonia

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.



The ladder of divine ascent

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.



**The monks always sought seclusion from the world
Ostrog Monastery in Montenegro**

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.

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University of Thessaloniki (abridged text from the book Images of Athos by
monk Chariton)

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Panayiotis Christou Reprinted from "The Orthodox Ethos", Studies in
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Mount Athos

the monastic Acropolis of the Orthodox World



ORTHODOX MONASTERIES AND MONASTICISM

Greek Orthodox Monastery of St. Catherine - SINAI (7th century)

MONACHOS.NET - A Web Site Devoted to Orthodox Monasticism

Medieval Monasticism

General Resources on Monasticism in the Middle Age

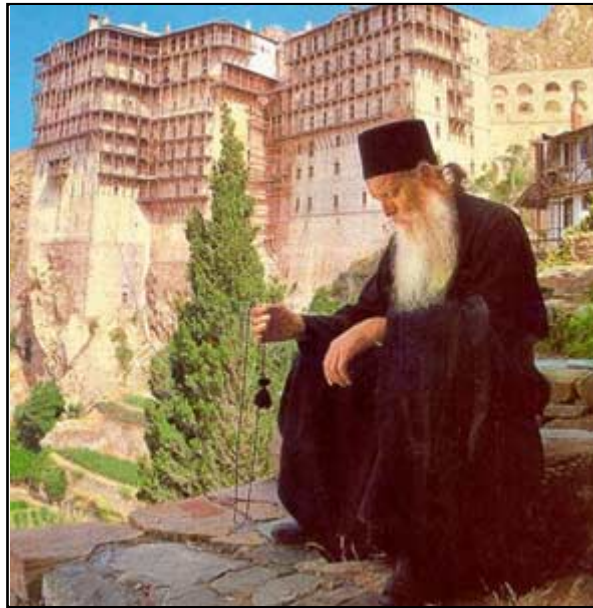
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Monastery of Meteora, Thessaly Greece



A monk in prayer (Mount Athos - Greece)

Monasteries of Kosovo and Metohija

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1. Historical Overview
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View of the Holy peninsula and the Aegean from the peak of Mount Athos,
Greece

FOOTNOTES:

- 1 Maximos the Confessor, *Mystagogia* 1, PG91, 665C.
- 2 See Eph. 5, 32
- 3 Presbeia 33. Also see Justin, *Confession* 1, 15, 6.
- 4 Mk.8, 34.

- 5 Mt 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 Chretiennes" vol.50, Paris 21970m
0,243,
- 13 Catechism 12, 132-5, ed B. Krivocheine, "Sources Chretiennes" vol.104, Paris
1964, p.374.
- 14 Catechism 5, 122-5, ed B. Krivocheine, "Sources Chretiennes". vol.96, 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 Mt. 22, 30
- 19 See Service for the Little Habit. The Greater Prayer-Book, p. 192.
- 20 Mt. 5, 48.
- 21 Maximus 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 Contemplation, p.26f.
- 25 See Archimandrite Sophrony, *We Shall See Him as He is*, Essex, England
31996, p.389.
- 26 See Archimandrite Sophrony, Saint Silouan of Mount Athos, Essex, England
7/995, p.572 Also Asceticism and Contemplation, p.42.
- 27 1 Cor. 4, 10
- 28 The Elder Paisios, Letters, Souroiti, Thessaloniki 1994, p.235. 29 Jn. 5, 44. 30 See
Archimandrite Sophrony, Asceticism and Contemplation, pp.33-4.

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