

# The Greater Angelic Image in Orthodox Monasticism

[HOME](#) | [SEND THIS PAGE TO A FRIEND](#) | [EMAIL US](#)



Orthodox monasticism is inconceivable without its loftiest step - the Great **Schema**. The Holy Fathers of the Church regarded it as the culmination of monastic life. Monks find in the Great Schema the complete expression of their vocation - the attainment of the Gospel ideal of holy perfection. A man ascends to this level only gradually - according to his strength through life-long effort.

Monastic life elevates a monk to spiritual perfection in the spirit of Christ's love and, by living in this love, bears light and spiritual warmth to the world.

By withdrawing from the world, a monk does not express contempt for it, but, on the contrary, acquires a perfect love for the world, a pure love in Christ which is alien to worldly passions. By turning away from vanity the monk strives to perceive himself and his impotence, and to fortify himself spiritually through prayer to God.

The Great Schema in the Orthodox Church requires the same traditional vows, plus special spiritual feats. "In the understanding of the Church, the Great Schema is nothing less than the supreme vow of the Cross and death; it is the image of complete isolation from the earth, the image of transformation and transfiguration of life, the image of death and the beginning of another, higher, existence." (1)

As a monastic dignity, the Great Schema has been known since the 4th century. According to an ancient legend, this dignity was inaugurated by St. Pachomius the Great. However, as a form of monastic life, the Great Schema goes back to the origin of Christianity. Those who followed Christ's teachings on supreme spiritual perfection by voluntarily taking the vows of chastity, obedience and poverty were called ascetics to distinguish them from other Christians. They led a harsh and secluded hermit's life like St. John the Baptist, or like our Lord Jesus Christ Himself during his forty days in the desert.

By the 4th century, Christian asceticism had taken two forms-the anchoritic or hermitic, and the communal or cenobitic.

From ancient times the Holy Church has sanctified both forms of monasticism as equally valid in terms of their purpose-spiritual perfection. The difference between them lies not in their essence but in the nature of their activities; it is determined by the intentions and abilities of the monk, and, to a certain extent, by external circumstances.

Thus, the name of St. Antony the Great is linked with the isolated hermitic life, the so-called contemplative monasticism. On the other hand, the name of St. Pachomius, an ascetic of the same era (4th century), is associated with the appearance of



communal monastic life-so-called cenobitism. It is evident from their lives how miraculously and providentially the two forms of monasticism were organized. The main vow, one that is common to both forms of monasticism, is that of obedience either to a starets (if the monk is leading a hermitic life) or to a hegumen (if he is living in a cenobitic monastery).



"A monk must frankly tell his starets how many steps he takes or how many drops of water he drinks in his cell, lest he thereby commit a sin," (2) the spiritual fathers told the newly professed.

The Pule of St. Pachomius, which was revealed to him by an angel, defined monasticism in external terms and demonstrated the essence of monastic life. "Do not admit anyone to the performance of higher feats till three years have passed," the angel said. "Let him enter this domain only when he has accomplished some hard work." (3)

St. Pachomius began his monastic path as a hermit. However, he saw in cenobitism a form of monasticism which affects more than hermitism a monk's spiritual life and promotes the perfect development of his soul's qualities.

According to the Rule of St. Pachomius, the act of acceptance into a monastery had three steps and consisted of (a) "temptation" (trial), (b) clothing, and (c) presentation to the starets for spiritual guidance. Each of the three steps undoubtedly had its own significance. They marked the beginning of the three stages in monasticism which have become deeply embedded in the life of the Eastern Church: first, the novice (or ryasofor); the second, the monk (known as inantiyniy or monk of the Lesser Schema); and the third, the monk of the Great Schema (or simply skhimnik).

The Church historians Sozomen, Bishop Palladius of Helenopolis and Hieromonk Nicephorus maintain that St. Pachomius was the first to invest monks with the full monastic dianitvthe schema . (4)

Whereas, in the Rule of St. Pachomius acceptance into a monastery ,was marked by the ritual of clothing, the rules of subsequent eras introduced a no less important element into the act of accepting monasticism-the Solemn St. Basil the Great who deftniteiy incuded the taking of the vows of chastity, obedience, and poverty into this office.

An Early Church monument: "Ecclesiastical Hierarchy", attributed to St. Dionisius the Areopagite, describes the ancient form of profession with regard to hermits. It is notable for combining in it specific features of the early monastic rules. It is in fact the fullest and most definitive office known.

This office clearly distinguishes three acts:

- the candidate's formal renunciation of the world,
- the cruciform. cutting of his hair, and
- his vesting in the habit. These steps had already acquired a sacramental significance in early times. Usually monastic vows were made in the church before the holy altar in the presence of all the brethren.

The tradition of cutting the hair is particularly interesting. It was the custom of the Egyptian ascetics to shave off their hair. The Pule of St. Pachomius contains special

regulations to this effect. However, when monasticism was brought to Greece from Egypt, a completely different custom arose: the Greeks did not cut their hair.

During the early days of monasticism no particular significance was attached to the cutting or not cutting of the hair. Only with the advent of cenobitic rules governing the ascetic's external life was this question definitely resolved. The cutting of the hair did not imply complete shaving of the head, but it became a symbol of an ascetic's dedication to God, of his elevation to a certain stage of life and work in the Church of Christ like the ordination of the clerics.

After the cutting of the hair the monk was vested in the habit either white in colour (the symbol of angelic purity) or black (*a token of lamentation for former sins*). The habit consisted of the kukol (headdress) with the cross on its front and maforfy (cape), which covered the monk's neck and shoulders. His under-garment was the koloviy or chiton, which was particularly coarse in the case of strict ascetics and was known as the vlyasyanitsa (hair shirt). On top of the chiton the monk wore an analav, a square piece of cloth with the instruments of the Passion depicted on it and worn on the back. His waist was bound tightly with a leather belt. The monk's upper-garment was a milot (mantle), and he wore sandals on his feet. Incidentally, on entering a church for Holy Communion or just to pray, the Egyptian monks removed their footwear. The final element of the habit was the staff.

This type of habit was worn in cenobitic monasteries. However, judging from certain written records, it could also be worn by hermits. Thus, for example the kukol and the chiton were characteristic of both (5). However, hermits also had other coarser habits than those worn by cenobites.

The Rule of cenobitic monasteries also specified the age of entry into the monastery. Usually postulants were admitted from the age of 16 or 17, on condition that the candidate was firmly resolved to lead a monastic life.

Both in the East and the West the candidate was professed in the church. Moreover in the Western Church professions took place on feast days.

In early times the right to profess was reserved for bishops. However, it was soon extended to deacons. In the East even an ordinary monk could profess. In all cases, however, it was performed with the knowledge and blessing of the bishop.

When convents came into existence, they began to use almost the same habits and rules of profession which existed in monasteries.

The early rules of the 4th century remained basically unchanged. But this did not exclude further developments in the ritual of entry into the monastery. They were conditioned by historical circumstances.

The 4th century was the period which witnessed the most intensive pursuit of monasticism. It was the age in which it blossomed. However, besides the true monks there were a considerable number of dissemblers, especially among the anchorites.

The fame of the true ascetics - the hermits - spread far afield. But some withdrew to the desert for motives other than that of isolation, and this led to distortions in the essence of monastic life. Some hermits went into towns and villages and interfered in ecclesiastical and secular affairs. In its 23rd canon the Fourth Ecumenical Council stated that it would be beneficial for monks to be placed directly under the surveillance of bishops. Anchorites had to be settled in cenobitic monasteries. By this act, however,

the Church did not by any means abolish the ancient and blessed custom of asceticism, rather she made it a form of cenobitism.

St. Basil the Great, the Blessed Jerome and other fathers and teachers of the Church (as, for instance, St. Pachomius mentioned above) regarded cenobitic monasticism as a spiritually more beneficial form of monastic life for many monks than the hermitic.

Anchoritism in the conditions of communal life was given a definite "degree" or "rank". It became known as the greater angelic image as distinct from ordinary cenobitism, which was called the lesser angelic image.

However, the new order laid down by the Fourth Ecumenical Council was not immediately accepted everywhere. It came into force gradually and led to certain changes in monasticism. A newcomer to a cloister did not immediately embark on a life of isolation. After several years of "temptation" (trial) he took the vows of the Lesser Schema, which corresponded to cenobitism. Then, after he had fulfilled his obediences with his brethren, when, in the words of the Blessed Jerome, even the monk's appearance and speech presented an image of virtue, (6) he could seek solitude in the monastery and take the Great Schema.

Thus, St. John Climacus only began his life in isolation after spending 19 years as a cenobite.

In the 7th century, the Trullan Synod laid down in its 41st canon the definite period of time required for the transition from cenobitism to seclusion.

It should be noted that not all the fathers and ascetics of the Church divided monasticism into the greater and lesser angelic images. For instance, St. Theodore of Studios did not agree with this division, considering that there should be only one form of monasticism, just as there was one Sacrament of Baptism.

However, the custom of dividing monasticism into two became widespread in the practice of the Church. The Lesser Schema thus became a kind of preparatory step to the Great Schema. Cenobitism came to be known as "betrothal", and seclusion within a monastery as actual "matrimony". In accordance with the Rule the difference between the Great and Lesser Schema began to be reflected in the habit. Those of the former had embroidered crosses on their habit, while the latter did not (7).

Those who take the Great Schema vows must be like an angel in the flesh; they must attain that degree of spiritual perfection which is possible for man. Constant contemplation of God, life in Him the One, and silence - such is their vocation.

The analav and kukol of the Great Schema monks are the signs of perfect monasticism, symbols not only of humble wisdom and gentleness, but also of the Cross, of suffering, of Christ's wounds, of constant dying with Christ.

## The Order of the Greater Angelic Image

The Great Schema entails the repetition of the vows of the Lesser Schema. But, at the same time, the Great Schema is symbolized by a new habit - the **kukol** and **analav** - and by the prayers read during the vesting. By repeating monastic vows a monk being

professed in the Great Schema emphasizes with special force the essence and purpose of his feat. The Holy Church has always attached particular importance to this order.

According to the ancient order of profession for the Great Schema, the monk's habit was taken into the church on the eve and placed at the foot of the altar.

According to Prof. A. Dmitrievsky, the 17th and 18th century order of profession for the Great Schema has preserved the early forms of the order.

At Matins, on the day of profession, the usual canons were read together with another canon relating to the Order of the Greater Angelic Image.

The profession was made during Divine Liturgy, after the Lesser Entrance. This undoubtedly endowed the rite with a special Liturgical significance. Partaking of the Holy Sacrament of Christ during Liturgy fortified the monk spiritually and confirmed him on his new path.

After the entrance with the Gospel, the dismissal troparion of the day is followed by the singing of three other troparia, during which the monk approaches the Holy Doors. Then the hegumen questions him on his voluntary desire for the monastic life, his obedience to the hegumen and his preservation of chastity—that is, the same questions which are asked upon being professed for the lesser angelic image.

In the Office of the Great Schema the so-called catechetical exhortations on the perfect life—which the hegumen gives to the monk—are notable for the depth of their meaning. "Rejoice in joy and be merry in merriment," the office reads, "for today the Lord God has chosen you and taken you from the world and stood you before His face in your new monastic dignity"<sup>(8)</sup>.

Then follow the cutting of the hair and the vesting in the habit of the Great Schema. According to the early offices two took part in the ritual—the hegumen of the brotherhood and the presbyter who actually performed the rite.

It is clear from the Greater Euchologion what was done by the hegumen during the cutting of the hair (he questioned the candidate, exhorted him and then took part in the rite of transferring the scissors from the candidate to the presbyter) and what the priest did. The presbyter performed one or other of the rites according to the directions of the hegumen. The hegumen himself was regarded in accordance with ancient rites as the sponsor of the candidate.

In the 17th century there were changes made in certain rites. The order of profession acquired an independent formulation. The profession for the Great Schema no longer took place during Divine Liturgy. The brethren gathered in the church for the ceremony which was accompanied by solemn singing and the exhortation delivered by the hegumen. The Great Ektene is followed by the reading from the Apostle (Eph., pericope 233) and the Gospel (Mt., pericope 39 and 43).

Whereas the early order of profession for the Great Schema consisted only in the addition of a kukol and an analav to the monk's habit, the later order calls for complete vesting. The candidate is led into the church wearing only a srachitsa (long undershirt) and barefooted. He is given a new name and vested in the habit, then a lighted candle and a cross are placed in his hands. This order of profession is in the Greater Euchologion and is used right up to the present day.

After being professed, the monk is handed over to a starets for spiritual guidance. He

spends eight days in the church (in the case of the Lesser Schema the period is five days).

In addition to the complete order of the Office of the Great Schema there were also abridged ones. The office was abridged with the thought that monastic vows were unrepeatable. The candidate for the Great Schema is not asked questions, nor his hair cut, but merely vested in the habit of the Great Schema: the pletitsy (**analav**) and skhima (**kukol**).

The prayers in the Office of the Great Schema are of a strictly ascetic character; they repeat the idea of renewed Baptism and renewed repentance on the part of the monk. "May this Divine Image bring transformation of life and transfiguration", we read in the third canticle of the canon: "and purification from sins be granted Thy loyal servant who comes to Thee" (9).

The deeply stirring canticles were compiled from the Holy Gospel and patristic works. Thus, in the third antiphon of Tone 4 we read almost word for word the Gospel text: Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me: for I am meek and lowly in heart, and ye shall find rest unto your souls. (10)

Many canticles were composed by monks who were well-known hymnists: St. John of Damascus and his friend St. Cosmas Melodus, St. Joseph the Hymnographer, who composed the well-known troparion: "Open Thy arms, O Father..." and the sticheron: "Our way, O brethren, is to apprehend the power of this sacrament ...".

The ritual of escorting the new Great Schemamonk to the refectory and the removal of the kukol have remained unchanged in all the offices.

A long-standing practice is to admit to the Great Schema only monks of the Lesser Schema. Professing novices to the Great Schema has never been approved.

Monasticism had taken firm root in Russia by the end of the 10th century. Numerous monasteries and convents were founded. Profession is conducted according to offices translated from the Greek and Bulgarian. St. Feodosiy introduced the three stages of monkhood into the cenobitic Kiev-Pechery monastery after the example of the Greek monasteries. It is clear from the life of St. Pimen the Long-Suffering that at the marvellous profession of St. Pimen the brotherhood came to know the Office of the Great Schema.

The Great Schema was always regarded with reverence in Russia. Since ancient times it has been a widespread custom among the Russian people to take the schema before death.

The tradition of taking the vows of the Great Schema has always been preserved in Russian monasteries. For those seeking complete silence seclusion within cloisters was permitted or alternative sketes were set up with a strictly hermitic way of life, where laymen could not enter even to pray.

Cloisters were often set up after the example of the ancient Palestinian monasteries. The dwelling place of a hermit, who had achieved spiritual perfection, frequently became the site for a monastery. Such was the origin of the Trinity-St. Sergiy Monastery at Radonezhie near Moscow and many other cloisters in Russia.

St. Sergiy of Radoriezh began his monastic life as a hermit. In his wooden Church of



the Holy Trinity in the wilderness, he took vows for the lesser angelic image-the Lesser Schemawhich enabled him to assume the position of hegumen when his first followers settled near him.

the Hymnographer, who composed the well-known troparion: "Open Thy arms, O Father..." and the sticheron: "Our way, O brethren, is to apprehend the power of this sacrament ...".

The ritual of escorting the new Great Schemamonk to the refectory and the removal of the kukol have remained unchanged in all the offices.

A long-standing practice is to admit to the Great Schema only monks of the Lesser Schema. Professing novices to the Great Schema has never been approved.

Monasticism had taken firm root in Russia by the end of the 10th century. Numerous monasteries and convents were founded. Profession is conducted according to offices translated from the Greek and Bulgarian. St. Feodosiy introduced the three stages of monkhood into the cenobitic Kiev-Pechery monastery after the example of the Greek monasteries. It is clear from the life of St. Pimen the Long-Suffering that at the marvellous profession of St. Pimen the brotherhood came to know the Office of the Great Schema.

The Great Schema was always regarded with reverence in Russia. Since ancient times it has been a widespread custom among the Russian people to take the schema before death.

The tradition of taking the vows of the Great Schema has always been preserved in Russian monasteries. For those seeking complete silence seclusion within cloisters was permitted or alternative sketes were set up with a strictly hermitic way of life, where laymen could not enter even to pray.

Cloisters were often set up after the example of the ancient Palestinian monasteries. The dwelling place of a hermit, who had achieved spiritual perfection, frequently became the site for a monastery. Such was the origin of the Trinity-St. Sergiy Monastery at Radonezhie near Moscow and many other cloisters in Russia.



St. Sergius of Radonezh began his monastic life as a hermit. In his wooden Church of the Holy Trinity in the wilderness, he took vows for the lesser angelic image-the Lesser Schemawhich enabled him to assume the position of hegumen when his first followers settled near him.

St. Sergiy set up his monastery in isolation from the world. But for all his cares he never abandoned the world and its needs. He loved in deed his own Russian people, endured their fate and prayed for them as part of his monastic service. Following the example of St. Antony of Egypt, the first Christian hermit of the East, St. Sergiy left his cloister in the wilderness and set out for the capital-Moscow-and stayed there awhile fortifying the Moscow prince spiritually and supporting him in state affairs.

Half a year before his death, St. Sergiy handed over the hegumenship to St. Nikon. The brethren parted regretfully with their meek hegumen but could not disagree with his wish, for he apparently intended to take the Great Schema. On old icons, and embroidered shrouds, St. Sergiy is depicted in the habit of the Great Schema with

**crosses.**

**In the Lavra of St. Sergiv they still retain the custom whereby monks take the Great Schema in their declining years. Between 1948 and the beginning of the 1970s, ten monks took the vows of the Great Schema, many of them over 80 years old.**

**Their names have been entered in the brotherhood's diptych:**

- **Schema hegumen Aleksiy, Schema Archimandrite Serapion,**
- **Schema hierodeacon Varnava Zaitsev + April 3, 1962),**
- **Schema hegumen Stefan Lazarev + April 16, 1963),**
- **Schema hegumen Mikhail Sokolov (monastic name-Mefodiy, +1966),**
- **Schema hierodeacon Sergiy Makarov (monastic name Leontiy, + December 11, 1967),**
- **Hieroschema monk Gavriil Gorshkov (monastic name Korniliy, + November 6, 1967),**
- **Schema hegumen Mikhail Gorbovich (monastic name Mina, +May 18, 1967),**
- **Schema Archimandrite Osiya Evseyenok (monastic name Iosif, +May 17, 1970),**
- **Schema Archimandrite Serafim Semyonovykh (monastic name Petr, confessor of the Lavra, +January 4, 1971).**

**Like other departed brothers of the holy cloister, all the Great Schema monks are buried in the town cemetery in Segiev Posad (Zagorsk).**

**For every monk the most desired feat of the soul-the feat of attaining perfection-is the taking of the Great Schema. Since times of old monks have spoken of the Great Schema as the culmination of monkhood. They have invested this word with a profound inner meaning. It is in monkhood that the sacrificial side of man's service of God is most expressed, for monks love God with a perfect love - in accordance with the Gospel behest: ... with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind (Mt. 22. 37).**

---

**The word Schema in Greek means "shape", "figure", "manner". The Great Schema (usually only "schema") is, consequently, great angelic "shape" or image in monasticism. The Lesser Schema-the lesser image in monasticism - includes ordinary monks (in distinction to novices and schemamonks).**

## **NOTES**

1. Archpriest G. S. Debolsky, *Popechenie Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi o spasenii mira*. ("The Orthodox Church's Concern for the World's Salvation"). St. Petersburg, 1894, p. 433.
2. "Dostopamyafnye skazaniya o podvizhn[chesfve svyatykh i blazhennykh ofsev" ("Memorable fales of the ascetic acts of the holy and blessed fathers"). St. Petersburg, 1845. p. 8.
3. Bishop Palladiy of Elenopolsk. *Lavsaiik*. St. Petersburg. 1850. p. 116.
4. " Hermias Sozomen of Salamis. *Church History*. St. Petersburg, 1850. 1, 3, chap. 17.
5. "Dostoparnyatriye skazaniya" ("Memorable fales"). Moscow, 1845, p. 24.
6. St. Jerome, *Hicronymus, Ieronim the Blessed. Tvoreniya (Works)*. Kiev, 1880, vol. III, p. 59.
7. E. E. Golubinsky. *Istoria Russkoi Tserkvi (History of the Russian Church)*. Moscow, 1904, Vol. 1, Chap. 2, p. 565.



8. Bolshoi frebnik (Greater Euchologion). Moscow, 1897. Posleclovanie velikogo angelskogo, obraza (Order of the Greater Angelic Image), chap. 28. p. 70.

9. Bolshoi frebnik, chap. 28, p. 71.

10. Ibid. p. 74.

**See also:** Archimandrife Feodosiy Offarshevsky. Palesfinskoe monashesfvo v IV-VI vekah. (Palesinian monasticism in the 4th-6th centuries). Kiev, 1899 (a magister's dissertation), pp. 5-7.

(See also "Tserkovnye vedomosfi". 1906, No. 1)

Konstanfinopolskoe monashesfvo. St. Petersburg, bk. 1, p. 55.

Archimandrife Porfiriy Uspensky. St. Dionysius, the Areopagife Chfeniya v obshchesfve Iyubitelei dukhovnogo prosveshcheniya (Readings in the Society of Lovers of Spiritual Enlightenment), 1878, Vol. 11. V. A. Chagovets. Prepodobniy Feodosiy Pecherskiy, ego zhizn; sochineniya. (St. Feodosiy of Pechery; his life and works). Kiev, 1901, p. 26.

Archimandrife Innokenfiy Belyaev (later ExarcVt of Georgia). Posfrizhenie v monashesfvo. Opyt isforiko-lifurgicheskogo issleclovaniya (The taking of monastic vows. An attempt at a hisforical-lifurgical study), magisfer's dissertation. Vilna, 1899, p. 175.

---

**Archimandrite (today he is Archbishop) EVILOGIY, Magister of Theology**

---

[HOME](#)

 [SpyLOG](#)