



Monastic Musings

Winter 2014

Happenings

By: Right Rev. Barb Martzall

Welcome to 2014. I pray that it will be a great year for you and your family! So far, this new year has presented itself as one cold and miserable one when it comes to the weather. But one can



hold onto the thought that with all the “pain” we are feeling due to the weather, there will be such beauty and warmth come Spring time! Everything will be rejuvenated and come back to life.

It looks as if it is going to be a great year for our Monastic Community as well as our Church, the [Ohio Orthodox Catholic Church](#)! I know that Archbishop Charles has three people training in the Minor Orders who are members of the [Our Lady of Peace Cathedral](#) in Cincinnati, OH. That will mean in time he will have some sacramental help within the Cathedral and local community. The Church continues to grow slowly but steadily!

Our Monastic Community, [Holy Theotokos of Mercy Community](#), has received a new member. We welcome Fr. Ron Lahti who is a Stavrophor (fully professed) monastic priest. Fr. Ron has been officially accepted as an Eastern Rite monastic priest within the Ohio Orthodox Catholic Church. Fr. Ron presently lives in Belen, NM and has been a longtime friend of Mother Myrella and Bishop Barb and a fellow monastic priest. Fr. Ron’s ministry is one of counseling and sharing his faith with those who desire to listen. Just as Mother Myrella and Bishop Barb have walked many different religious pathways, so has Fr. Ron. Once again the three of us have joined together in doing God’s work in this world. Fr. Ron brings a fresh perspective and even challenges to one’s Christian faith. Fr. Ron will be lending his writing skills and teaching skills to the monastic community and to the church as a whole as we try to help others understand God and His unconditional love for us. We are very happy to have Fr. Ron as a part of our Community!

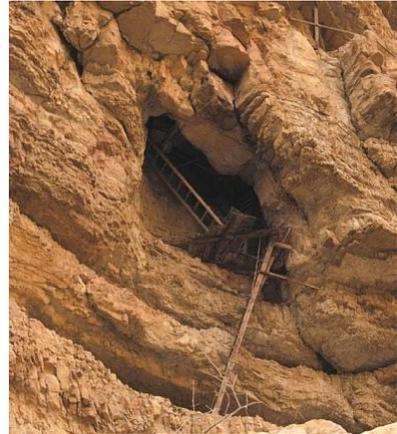
General History of Monasticism

By Fr. Ron Lahti

The formation and growth of early Christianity was mostly an urban, cosmopolitan experience. The new faith spread from city to city mostly via trade routes. As the faith was accepted, and

eventually, institutionalized as the state religion, some Christians became disillusioned with the formalism and common experience of the faith. These believers hungered for a deeper, more direct experience of God. Based on the examples of great men of faith like Abraham, Moses, Elijah and even Jesus, these believers turned to the deserts of Syria and Egypt as the arenas in which they would test their faith and, hopefully, win the prize of a closer communion with the Divine.

The earliest desert dwellers were mostly hermits living in caves or improvised mud huts, far from any city or contact with other people. Each hermit would devise his/her own rule of life built around strict fasting, prayer, reading of scripture and physical mortifications. Over time, the desert dwellers found it necessary, for protection as well as everyday living needs, to form into small, more closely knit communities. These communities, like any society, found that they needed a common rule to follow – avoiding extremism and slackness in their efforts. Eventually, other believers wanting to follow the same path of a closer life with God, but not having the means (or physical capabilities) of life in the desert, started to form similar communities of strugglers, but now closer to major cities. It is at this time that we see a divergence between East and West in the formation of monasticism.



In the West, the communities, closely situated near cities and trade routes, grew in popularity and in populations. Large communities of several hundred needed a comprehensive rule of life to govern and to provide structure for the spiritual quest. Of the many rules that emerged, The Rule of St. Benedict is probably the most famous, and most followed in the West to this day. But other spiritual giants such as St. Francis of Assisi, St. Teresa of Avila also formulated

Rules which reflected their particular vision of the spiritual journey. In general the tone of the Western monastic life was seeking a balance between engagement with the society around them (such as in teaching, caring for the poor and ill) and the inner life of individual struggle for divine encounter. Spiritual practices such as the Rosary, novenas, even the Divine Office reflect the efforts to find spiritual practices which can be “fit in” with other tasks.

In the East, the development of monastic communities, every bit as large and popular as in the West, took a different turn. Here we find extremely simple Rules which address everyday management of the community and setting a time schedule to be followed by members of the community. Unlike the Rules of the West, the Eastern monastic rules are not focused on providing structure for the spiritual life. This latter function was instead fulfilled by the tradition of the staretz or spiritual elder. A spiritual



aspirant was expected to identify one spiritually elder monk to be his guide in the spiritual struggle. This elder (Russian: staretz) regulated every aspect of the aspirant's life – the aspirant seeking “a blessing” from the elder to engage in even the most menial, trivial or common tasks of life (“A Blessing Father to seek a new job”, “A Blessing Father to take my lunch now”, “A Blessing Father to marry N.”). The monastic life of the East was far less involved with social concerns, making the encounter with God the sole focus and end of the spiritual life. Here, the practices of hesychasm (quieting the thoughts), the Jesus prayer being most well-known such practice, found a footing and flourished. While the Eastern monastic mystics were not opening schools or hospitals as a means of bettering the world, they still saw (and continue to see) their “work of prayer” as providing an essential balance to the perceived powers of darkness and worldliness seen in the world around them. There is a popularly known saying ascribed to the monks of Athos that if ever there are no longer monks praying on Athos, the powers of darkness will overwhelm and destroy the world as we know it.

Looking at the seemingly divergent streams of practice between Eastern and Western monastics, we can actually see some common threads: 1) the desire to go beyond the usual practices of the faith to find a deeper, more experiential encounter with God, 2) seeing the means to this end as a withdrawal from “ordinary life” to “come away” from everyday activities, 3) reliance on a set standard, a rule or the direct guidance of a staretz to guide one's journey – not trusting one's own judgment or choice, 4) the reason for the journey is to make one closer to God and to become a greater channel for good in the world – in West most often seen in works of love in education, health care and political/social movements while in the East seen as a commitment to prayer with the view of “holding back the darkness” and raising the spirit of humankind.

Before we begin to consider what these divergent trends in “monastic spirituality” mean for us today, mention must be made that the principles found in Christian monastic spirituality are not limited to this faith tradition. The four basic principles of monastic spirituality outlined above are also seen in Buddhist, Sanatan (Hindu), Taoist, and Animist/Indigenous/Earth-Based religious paths. There appears to be a basic drive in some people to go beyond the ordinary observance of a religious tradition to seek a deeper experience of the Divine. As modern mystics such as Bede Griffiths, Thomas Merton, HH the Dalai Lama stress, the path to a deeper experience of the Transcendent often moves the person to go beyond their religious structures into a more Universal understanding and experience.

Most of us today are either not called or capable of simply “leaving the world” and entering a monastery to satisfy our desire for a deeper spiritual walk. Instead, we can consider the basic principles of monastic spirituality and creatively adapt them to our lives. First we need to honor and cherish our call to “come away” and seek a deeper walk with God – not that we are better than our co-religionists who do not feel the way we do, only that we are called to a different path than they. Second, our withdrawal from ordinary life might be actual as in taking a regular retreat, setting aside specific times for meditation/prayer in a specific place, or it might be more “virtual” learning how to work quiet times into busy schedules for re-focusing our spiritual attention. (I've often had to resort to the monastery of the bathroom for this!) Third, we seek a specific model of spirituality to guide us on our way but must be careful that it does not become a chain around us holding us back. If we are fortunate to find an actual staretz for guidance –

wonderful – otherwise we must make use of the many writings of spiritual guidance, and even more importantly, form a relationship with others on the path and become a “corporate staretz”. Finally, we cannot use our deeper spiritual path as an escape from the pressures and discomforts of the world but rather as a means of greater involvement in bringing more light to the world, the job of “tikkun olam” – repairing the world.

Happy Journeys!

Pursuit of God Through Our 21st Century Monasticism

By: Right Rev. Barb Martzall and Mother Myrella LeClair

In 2002, a group of people which included Bishop Barb and Mother Myrella – all clergy within another independent church – met one another and engaged in conversation about eastern and western spirituality. They proposed that a monastic community be formed to explore spirituality. While the focus would be essentially on Eastern and Western Christian spirituality, there would be no limitation on exploring spirituality in other religious traditions. This group was given approval to establish the community. However, the original reason for forming the community, a community in which we could study and learn different spiritualities together - with no limits on what could be discussed - was never realized.

The community failed after about two and a half years given that the basis of the community was caught up in strictly following old western monastic models, although we had agreed on using the Eastern Orthodox monasticism as our framework. The community fell into a trap that instead of raising the personal spirituality of each community member, the old models created spiritual stagnation. Instead of allowing for freedom of prayer time and a basic personal rule (monastic rule), the leader of the community decided to use Benedictine monastic rules, which in the long run stifled the community through its rigidity of functions during the day. There was no exploring of spirituality at all despite that being the reason for coming together as a community. The leader focused on following the dictates of the Benedictine Daily Rule instead of focusing on God.

However, just because that community failed did not mean it was a complete failure. Bishop Barb and Mother Myrella decided in 2006 that they would dedicate their lives as semi-hermit monastics and have their ministry be a monastic community built somewhat upon the Eastern Orthodox monasticism. It would be a monastic community without walls, where one’s home would become their hermitage. It is a non-traditional community in which everyone can freely explore spirituality without any limitation. Thus, the Holy Theotokos of Mercy Community would change its focus from a parish ministry to a focus as a monastic community. For this community to fully happen as was dreamed, it meant that Bishop Barb and Mother Myrella would have to change church jurisdictions to fulfill their vision of freely exploring various spiritualities within a modern-day monastic setting. So they moved into their new church jurisdiction in 2009.

The Holy Theotokos of Mercy Community is now formalized as a monastic community and has been so for the past several years. It really has been a blessing as the members of the community are allowed to explore different spiritualities, and they share what they are learning

with others in the community and the church as a whole. We have explored many of the mainline faiths that are within the world. In the process, there are things within each of the faiths that we may personally want to integrate within our spirituality. There are also aspects of the various faiths that may not be of any value to what we are exploring. All of the exploring we do as monastics actually makes our faith stronger and truly God-centered and it allows us to understand how other faiths perceive God.

The Community has laid out a very simple Daily Rule for the monastics to allow for them having work to support themselves, taking care of their living space (cleaning, food, etc.) while still maintaining a life rooted in the love of God and sharing that love within the world. The spiritual superior/elder with the input of the monastic develops a Rule that is very individualized for that monastic. The basic parts of the Rule include:

1. Time of prayer
2. What prayers to use
3. How long the prayer time should last
4. What spiritual readings should be studied
5. What scriptural reading should be studied
6. How long the “quiet time”/meditation should last

Once a month the monastic and the spiritual superior/elder review the progress of the monastic in following the Rule. Adjustments are made to the Rule to help the monastic grow spiritually. This growth would be evidenced by the “experiences” that the monastic has during their “quiet time” with God, what they are learning from their studies, and how they are applying what they have learned to all aspects of their daily life. As the monastic progresses, more prayer time and “quiet time” is added to the Rule. The Rule never becomes static for the monastic! It is a constant movement toward what the Eastern Orthodox call the “prayer of the heart”, that is the desire to spend all of their time in communion with God no matter what they are doing. The Rule moves the monastic’s life to become as prayer in all things that they do. It is a slow progression, but if the monastic “applies” himself or herself to the Rule, they will start to reap the blessings of living a God-centered life.

An example of a basic/starting Rule for a monastic who works 8am – 5pm and who lives alone:

1. Spends a minimum of 15 minutes in prayer with God before going to work
2. During the work day: Will thank God at least once an hour for what has happened in the last hour. Will ask for guidance as needed for any situation that creates “discomfort” in their mind.
3. At lunch break: Will take some time to just be quiet with God – to stand in His presence.
4. At the end of work: Will thank God again for all that he has given you during the day.
5. In the evening, set aside 30 minutes to do spiritual reading and scriptural studies followed by 30 minutes of “quiet time” with God followed by 15 minutes of prayer with God using whatever prayers the monastic finds meaningful
6. The rest of the evening is spent doing whatever the monastic desires or needs to do.
7. At bedtime: the monastic once more spends about 15 minutes in prayer and thanks God for all of the blessings He has bestowed.

As the monastic grows spiritually, he/she are given the chance to add in prayers that have meaning to them; the prayer times are increased and the “quiet time” is increased. The monastic is always encouraged to explore many different spiritual writings from many different sources. What a monastic will develop over a period of time is the capability to be in prayer even while doing other things. Prayer in time will become a constant activity for the mind of the monastic. It is a slow progression, but it will happen if the monastic works at it. What is very important for the monastic to do is to set a daily pattern for their Rule and follow it faithfully every day and not to allow any distractions during their prayer time, reading/studying time or “quiet time”. Developing and faithfully following a spiritual pattern is what will help the monastic truly live a spiritual life in this secular world.



Our type of monasticism is not an easy one since we are not living within physical monasteries. We are constantly challenged to spend time with God daily so that our lives are God focused. It is so easy to get caught up in the worldly activities and to forget to bring God into our activities. With daily prayer, each monastic manages to learn to put God first in their lives no matter what they are doing. We go together to Him by reflecting Him to all of His creation and join together as the Body of Christ, moving in unison to His holy embrace.

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Holy Theotokos of Mercy Community

All writings are the views of the author(s) on a particular subject and are meant to challenge your thinking so as to help you grow in your spiritual walk with God.

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