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PRAYER AND SILENCE

'...When you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father Who is in secret; and your Father Who sees in secret will reward you. And in praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask them'.^[1] These words of Christ may provoke the following question: what is the sense of praying if God knows beforehand what we actually need?

In answering this question, one should remember that prayer is not just a request for something; it is first of all an encounter with Someone, a dialogue with the living God. 'Prayer is communion of the intellect with God', according to a classic definition by Evagrius the Solitary.^[2] In prayer we encounter the personal God Who hears us and responds to us, Who is always ready to come to our assistance, Who never betrays us, even if we betray Him many times. In prayer we communicate with the sublime Reality which is the only true Life: compared to It, every other reality is partial and imperfect. Life without communion with God, without prayer, is but a long pathway towards death, a gradual dying. We live insofar as we participate in God, and we participate in God through prayer.

Why does Christ command us to avoid verbosity in prayer? Precisely because it is not out of words that prayer is born: prayer is not merely the sum of our requests addressed to God. Before being pronounced, prayer must be heard within one's heart. All true masterpieces of music and poetry were not simply composed out of disconnected letters or sounds: they were first born in the depths of their authors' heart, and were then incarnate in words or musical tones. Prayer is also creative work, born not from verbosity, but out of a deep stillness, out of concentrated and devoted silence. Before embarking upon the path of prayer, one must inwardly fall silent and renounce human words and thoughts.

The human person's heart, mind, mouth, and senses fall silent, when he is plunged into the waves of prayer. Words, sounds and worldly impressions disappear from his heart; his face is bowed to the ground, when he encounters God in the deepest stillness of his heart. 'Intelligent silence is the mother of prayer', says St John Climacus. 'The friend of silence draws near to God and, by secretly conversing with Him, is enlightened by God'.^[3] Metropolitan Kallistos of Diokleia says:

To achieve silence: this is of all things the hardest and the most decisive in the art of prayer. Silence is not merely negative - a pause between words, a temporary cessation of speech - but, properly understood, it is highly positive: an attitude of attentive alertness, of vigilance, and above all of listening. The hesychast, the person who has attained hesychia, inner stillness or silence, is par excellence the one who listens. He listens to the voice of prayer in his own heart, and he understands that this voice is not his own but that of Another speaking within him.^[4]

Like every conversation, prayer is a dialogue, and its aim is not only to express oneself but also to hear Another.

'Silence is a mystery of the age to come, but words are instruments of this world', says St Isaac the Syrian.^[5] In order to attain silence and stillness, monks deprived themselves of encounters and conversations with people, departed to deep deserts, hid themselves in mountains and woods.

There were three brothers, one ancient story tells us.^[6] One of them decided that his mission would be to bring people to reconciliation, the second decided he would visit the sick, while the third went to the desert to live in silence. The first, finding himself constantly between conflicting sides, did not succeed in bringing about peace and therefore was himself in distress. He came to the second and found him also in deep despondency. Together they went to the third brother and asked him whether he had achieved anything in his desert. Instead of an answer, the hermit poured some water into a chalice and invited his brothers to look at it: the water was so turbid that nothing could be seen in it. After a short time the hermit invited his guests to look again: the water settled and became transparent enough for them to see their

faces reflected on its surface. The hermit then said: 'Someone who lives among the passions and cares of the world will always be perturbed by thoughts, while a hermit contemplates God in stillness'.

An experience of stillness is essential for every person who wants to learn the art of prayer. To achieve this experience, one should not necessarily withdraw to the desert. But one has to put aside some minutes every day, go into one's room, 'shut the door and pray to God Who is in secret'. Our usual temptation, or deception, is that we are always very busy and forever rush to do something extremely important: we believe that if we spend too much time in prayer, we will not have the opportunity to do these important things. The experience of many people shows that half an hour spent in prayer seldom affects our 'business' negatively, in spite of our initial concerns. On the contrary, prayer teaches one to concentrate more to make one's mind more disciplined: as a result, time is won rather than lost.

The lack of taste for solitude and silence is one of the most common illnesses of the modern person. Many are even scared of remaining in stillness, being alone or having free time: they feel more comfortable being constantly occupied; they need words, impressions; they always hasten in order to have the illusion of an abundant and saturated life. But life in God begins when words and thoughts fall silent, when worldly cares are forgotten, and when a place within the human soul is freed to be filled by Him.

The church Fathers, following Jesus Christ Himself, emphasize that prayer should be simple and unsophisticated. The state of the one who prays is compared by St John Climacus with that of children speaking to their parents:

Let your prayer be completely simple... Do not be over-sophisticated in the words you use when praying, because the simple and unadorned lisping of children has often won the heart of their heavenly Father. Do not try to be verbose when you pray, lest your mind be distracted in searching for words. One word of the publican propitiated God, and one cry of faith saved the thief.[\[7\]](#)

Childlike faith must be combined with deep humility of heart, as St Isaac the Syrian emphasizes:

Walk before God in simplicity and not with knowledge... When you fall down before God in prayer, become in your thought like an ant, like a creeping thing of the earth, like a leech, and like a tiny lisping child. Do not say anything before Him with knowledge, but with a child's manner of thought draw near to God and walk before Him, that you may be counted worthy of that paternal providence that fathers have for their small children.[\[8\]](#)

Prayer, stillness, silence and humility are deeply connected with repentance: 'A man who loves conversation with Christ, loves to be alone. But he who loves to linger with many is a friend of this world... If you love repentance, love stillness also'.[\[9\]](#) Thus, without inner stillness and silence, neither repentance nor prayer are possible.

WATCHFULNESS

Being left alone in a room with the doors shut does not yet constitute stillness. Neither does the avoidance of talking constitute silence. Both are inward states which presuppose peace of mind and tranquillity of thoughts. Very often people who are alone and about to pray, find turmoil and chaos in their mind. Although they read prayers with their mouth, their mind wanders afar.

The early Fathers call distraction of mind during prayer meteorismos, light-mindedness. The reason for this distraction, they say, is that the human person is unable to control his thoughts, or the different images and fantasies that appear in the mind. To control his thoughts, the person must learn the art of nepsis (watchfulness, vigilance, alertness, sobriety). This is based on the understanding that every thought captures the human mind gradually. Thought in the mind passes through several stages of development. The first stage is called 'assault', which is a simple conception, or a sudden apparition of something in the mind, an image or idea that comes from outside. The second stage is 'converse', or 'conversation': the mind enters into a dialogue with the thought. This dialogue may become a 'struggle',

when the mind opposes the attacking thought and either rejects or accepts it. The acceptance of the thought by the mind is called 'captivity': it is 'a forcible and involuntary rape of the heart, or a permanent association with what has been encountered'. The last stage of the development of thought is 'passion': it is 'that which for a long time nestles with persistence in the soul, forming therein a habit, as it were, by the soul's long-standing association with it, since the soul of its own free and proper choice clings to it'.^[10]

Every passion begins with a sinful thought: 'No cloud is formed without a breath of wind; and no passion is born without a thought'.^[11] The fall of Eve is interpreted by St Philaret of Moscow in terms of the acceptance of a thought and its gradual transformation into passion. '...When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate'.^[12] 'Saw' is an assault of a thought; 'was good' and 'was a delight' are a converse and struggle with the thought; 'was to be desired' is an acceptance of the thought, Eve's being captivated by it; 'took and ate' is passion, when the thought is actualized and put into practice. 'A sinful disposition of the soul', St Philaret says, 'begins with the powers of the intellect being oriented in a wrong direction... The multiplicity of one's own desires, which are not centred around the will of God, is connected with one's deviation from the oneness of the divine truth into a multiplicity of one's own thoughts'.^[13] In other words, distraction is deviation from primordial simplicity and the state of unification into multiplicity and complexity. Distraction is a consequence of the Fall. The mind's acceptance of the sinful thoughts is an illness and a sin of the mind, a 'mental adultery' of the intellect.^[14]

The art of nepsis is the ability of the human person to refuse the sinful thought at the very moment of its first appearance in the mind, before it develops into a passion. 'The beginning of prayer', says St John Climacus, 'consists in banishing by a single thought^[15] the thoughts that assault us at the very moment that they appear'.^[16] According to St Hesychios the Priest,

The science of sciences and the art of arts is the mastery of evil thoughts. The best way to master them is to see with spiritual vision the fantasy in which the demonic provocation is concealed and to protect the mind from it. It is just the same as the way in which we protect our bodily eyes, looking sharply about us and doing all we can to prevent anything, however small, from striking them.^[17]

Evil thoughts must be 'opposed', they must be 'struggled with'. Therefore prayer is not only a peaceful dialogue with God but also a heavy labour, a fight for the purity of the mind. The one who prays must always be watchful of his intellect, memory and fantasy:

Try to make your intellect deaf and dumb during prayer; you will then be able to pray... When you pray, keep close watch on your memory, so that it does not distract you... For by nature the intellect is apt to be carried away by memories during prayer. While you are praying, the memory brings before you fantasies either of past things, or of recent concerns, or of the face of someone who has irritated you. The demon is very envious of us when we pray, and uses every kind of trick to thwart our purpose. Therefore he is always using our memory to stir up thoughts of various things and our flesh to arouse the passions, in order to obstruct our way of ascent to God... Stand on guard and protect your intellect from thoughts while you pray.^[18]

'INWARD MEDITATION'

The Eastern Orthodox Tradition has developed a special form of prayer, designated by the technical term *krypte melete*, 'secret occupation', 'inward meditation'. This type of prayer, known from as early as the fifth century, is still very widespread in the Orthodox world and consists of the constant repetition of a short formula of prayer, such as the Jesus prayer: 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me, a sinner'. There are also shorter formulae: 'Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy upon me', or 'Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me', or even 'Christ, have mercy' and 'Lord, have mercy'. The entire theory of 'inward meditation' is expressed in the following sixth/seventh-century monastic story:

A brother named John came from the coast to Father Philimon and, clasping his feet, said to him: 'What shall I do to be saved? For my intellect vacillates to and fro and strays after all the wrong things'. After a

pause, the father replied: 'This is one of the outer passions and it stays with you because you still have not acquired a perfect longing for God. The warmth of this longing and of the knowledge of God has not yet come to you'. The brother said to him: 'What shall I do, father?' Abba Philimon replied: 'Meditate inwardly for a while; for this can cleanse your intellect from these things'. The brother, not understanding what was said, asked the Elder: 'What is inward meditation, father?' The Elder replied: 'Keep watch in your heart; and with watchfulness say in your mind with awe and trembling: "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy upon me"...' The brother departed; and with the help of God and the Elder's prayers he found stillness and for a while was filled with sweetness by this meditation. But then it suddenly left him and he could not practise it or pray watchfully. So he went again to the Elder and told him what had happened. And the Elder said to him: 'You have had a brief taste of stillness and inner work, and have experienced the sweetness that comes from them. This what you should always be doing in your heart: whether eating or drinking, in company or outside your cell, or on a journey, repeat that prayer with a watchful mind and undeflected intellect... Even when carrying out needful tasks, do not let your intellect to be idle but keep it meditating inwardly and praying. For in this way you can... give unceasing work to the intellect, thus fulfilling the apostolic command: Pray without ceasing.[19] Pay strict attention to your heart and watch over it, so that it does not give admittance to thoughts that are evil or in any way vain and useless. Without interruption, whether asleep or awake, eating, drinking, or in company, let your heart inwardly and mentally at all times be meditating on the psalms, at other times be repeating the prayer, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me"'. [20]

The Jesus prayer has a special power because the holy name of Jesus is contained in it. It was He Himself Who commanded His disciples to pray in His name: 'Truly, truly, I say to you, if you ask anything of the Father, He will give it to you in My name. Hitherto you have asked nothing in My name; ask, and you will receive...'[21] He speaks of the wonderworking power of His own name: '...In My name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover'. [22] When the Apostles Peter and John healed the lame man, they were asked by rulers, elders and scribes: 'By what power or by what name did you do this?' The Apostles replied: '...By the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth... this man is standing before you well... For there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved'. [23]

There are many references to the name of Jesus in early Christian literature. We read in The Shepherd of Hermas (second century): 'The name of the Son of God is great and boundless, and upholds the entire universe... He supports those who wholeheartedly bear His name. He Himself is their foundation and carries them with love because they are not ashamed of bearing His name'. [24]

The practice of prayer in the name of Jesus has lived within the Orthodox tradition both in early centuries and in recent times. St John Climacus in the seventh century, St Gregory of Sinai in the thirteenth century, St Gregory Palamas and other Byzantine Hesychasts in the fourteenth century, St Nicodemos of Holy Mountain in the eighteenth century, St Seraphim of Sarov, St Theophan the Recluse, St John of Kronstadt in the nineteenth century, St Silouan of Mount Athos in the twentieth century - all these authors, to mention but a few, spoke of the Jesus prayer. [25]

According to the centuries-old Orthodox tradition, the power and energy of God is present in the holy name of Jesus. In the beginning of the twentieth century Monk Hilarion, a Caucasian hermit, wrote in his remarkable book *On the Mountains of the Caucasus*: 'The Son of God... in the fullness of His divine nature is present both in the Holy Eucharist and in Christian churches. He is also fully and entirely present in His name, with all His perfection and with the entirety of His divinity'. [26] Monk Hilarion quoted the following words of St John of Kronstadt: 'Let the name of the Lord... be for you instead of the Lord Himself... The name of the Lord is the Lord Himself...'. [27] Heated arguments arose on Mount Athos in the 1910s around these words and around the teaching of 'the adorers of the Name' (imyaslavtsi). The latter were accused of dogmatic inaccuracy, namely in confusing the name of God with His essence. However, as far as Hilarion's book is concerned, it is very much in tune with the Hesychast tradition of the veneration of the name of Jesus. Regrettably, with the outbreak of arguments around the name of Jesus,

this book was regarded as a manifesto of the 'adorers of the Name'. Banned from distribution by the Russian ecclesiastical censors, it has remained virtually unknown.

Of considerably more fame is another Russian book on the Jesus prayer, which was written in the second half of the nineteenth century and is known in the English-speaking world as *The Way of a Pilgrim*.^[28] The hero and author of this book was a simple Russian peasant, who heard in church the words of St Paul, 'Pray without ceasing',^[29] and was kindled with the desire to learn this unceasing prayer. For a long time he could not find a spiritual director. Eventually a starets (elder) told him of the practice of the Jesus prayer and commanded him to repeat three thousand prayers per day. The quantity then increased to six and twelve thousand per day, after which the peasant, who was a strannik (pilgrim) wandering from place to place, learned how to pray 'without counting prayers', that is, unceasingly.

And that is how I go about now, and ceaselessly repeat the prayer of Jesus, which is more precious and sweet to me than anything in the world. At times I do as much as 43 or 44 miles a day, and do not feel that I am walking at all. I am aware only of the fact that I am saying my Prayer... I thank God that I now understand the meaning of those words I heard in the Epistle: Pray without ceasing.^[30]

The basic rule which applies to the Jesus prayer, as well as to other kinds of prayer, is that one should 'enclose one's thoughts within the words of one's prayer'.^[31] It has been noticed, however, that when the mind is located in the head, it is very much subject to distraction and cannot concentrate. In order to acquire concentration, it is necessary to relocate the mind and place it in the heart. This ancient method of the descent of the mind into the heart, which was developed in early monasticism, is summed up by St Theophan the Recluse in one of his letters:

You should descend to your heart from your head... As far as I remember, you wrote to me that you had a headache from attentive prayer. This happens when one acts only with one's head. But when prayer descends into the heart, there will be no difficulty in prayer, for the head will become empty from the thoughts. All the thoughts are in the head, they follow one another, and it is impossible to control them. If you discover your heart and are able to stand within it, then, as soon as thoughts appear, you can descend therein, and the thoughts will disappear... The life is in the heart, so you should live in there. Do not think that this applies only to the perfect. No, it applies to everyone who begins to seek out the Lord.^[32]

In the monastic tradition, even a special physical technique was adopted for exercising the Jesus prayer.^[33] An unknown author of the famous *Method of Sacred Prayer and Attentiveness*^[34] says that in order to acquire attention during prayer a person must sit in a dark corner on a low chair, close his eyes, bow his head and hold breathing; his mind should find the heart's higher part and, being enclosed in there, pray with the prayer of Jesus.^[35] This method, however, is only an additional and secondary means of achieving attentive prayer, which might also be achieved without special exercises. The spiritual directors of the nineteenth century were very reserved about this method. St Theophan the Recluse, when translating the *Method of Sacred Prayer* into Russian, deliberately omitted everything connected with the physical techniques. 'These external means', he wrote in a special note, 'may scandalize some, may divert others from prayer and may distort the very practice of prayer... The essence of them is to get accustomed to holding one's mind within one's heart... How to reach this? Seek, and you will find.'^[36] The easiest way to find this is to walk before God and to labour in prayer...'^[37]

'Walking before God', or 'walking with God', is a biblical expression: in the Old Testament it is applied to the righteous people who were faithful to God and observed His commandments.^[38] In the Christian context, this expression points to the agreement between the life of the human person and the commandments of Christ. To walk before God means to measure every action and thought by the Gospel's standards, to remember God always, to feel His presence, not to sin against His truth. Prayer is helpful only when it is combined with a true Christian life according to the Gospel. The Christian ideal is that the whole life of a person should be transformed into an unceasing prayer, so that his every word and deed should be penetrated by prayer.

PRAYER AND THEOLOGY

'If you are a theologian, you will pray truly. And if you pray truly, you are a theologian'.^[39] These words of Evagrius stress the interrelationship between prayer and theology: one cannot exist without the other. For the church Fathers, theology was not an abstract theory about 'an unknown God': it was rather a search for a personal encounter with Him. Genuine theology is not 'about' God but is 'in' God; it does not consider God as an object, but converses with Him as a personal Being. Christian theology is derived from prayer and mystical experience. It is opposed to an 'objective' scholarship that is detached from God. Purification and stillness of the mind which are necessary for prayer are also required for theology:

Discussion of theology is not for everyone... It is not for all men, but only for those who... have undergone, or at the very least are undergoing, purification of body and soul. For one who is not pure to lay hold on pure things is dangerous, just as it is for weak eyes to look at the sun's brightness. What is the right time (for theology)? Whenever we are free from the mire and noise without, and our commanding faculty^[40] is not confused by illusory, wandering images... We need actually to be still in order to know God...^[41] Prayer, in turn, derives from theology and is based on it. There can be no true prayer outside true dogma: this is an essential belief of the Orthodox Church. Distortion of dogma leads to distortion of the practice of prayer, and vice versa: wrong forms of prayer give birth to erroneous dogmatic teachings. A true prayer is the one practised within the context of the church community, even if the question is about private prayer. 'Nobody is Christian by himself, but only as a member of the body', wrote Fr Georges Florovsky. 'Even in solitude, "in the chamber", a Christian prays as a member of the redeemed community, of the Church'.^[42] The personal prayer of every Christian is not disconnected from his prayer in the church: it is nothing else than a continuation of divine worship. The entire life of a Christian is the Liturgy which he celebrates in his heart and addresses to God the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The practice of prayer might be strikingly similar in different religious traditions, but its content is altogether dissimilar depending on the theological and dogmatic basis of prayer in every tradition. There are, for example, obvious similarities between the physical techniques of the Jesus prayer which exist in the Orthodox tradition and those employed in Yoga or Sufism. But neither in Yoga nor in Sufism do we find dogmas of the Trinity, or of Jesus Christ as God and Saviour, which lie at the very heart of the Christian prayer. As Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia emphasizes,

The essential point in the Jesus prayer is not the act of repetition in itself, not how we sit or breathe, but to whom we speak... The Jesus prayer is not just a device to help us concentrate or relax. It is not simply a piece of 'Christian Yoga', a type of 'Transcendental Meditation', or a 'Christian mantra'... It is, on the contrary, an invocation specifically addressed to another person - to God made man, Jesus Christ, our personal Saviour and Redeemer... The context of the Jesus prayer is first of all one of faith. The invocation of the Name presupposes that the one who says the prayer believes in Jesus Christ as Son of God and Saviour... Secondly, the context of the Jesus prayer is one of community. We do not invoke the Name as separate individuals..., but as members of the community of the Church.^[43]

St Paul speaks of the Holy Spirit praying within the Christian's heart.^[44] The Christian prayer is listening to the voice of God's Spirit in the human heart. It is not the human person who prays: it is God Himself Who prays within the human person. 'Why say more?' exclaims St Gregory of Sinai. 'Prayer is God, Who accomplishes everything in everyone,^[45] for there is a single action of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, activating all things through Christ Jesus'.^[46] If prayer is God the Trinity acting through Christ, there is not much in common between this prayer and that outside the Christian tradition. And if the one who prays truly is a theologian, then there is no true prayer outside the ultimate Truth - the incarnate Christ.

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MONASTICISM

In the Orthodox Church the rite of monastic tonsure has a sacramental character. It is called a 'sacrament' ('mystery') by Dionysius the Areopagite and other early Christian authors.^[47] It is also called a 'sacrament' in the rite itself. Like Baptism, it is death to fleshly life and a birth into a new, spiritual mode of existence. Like Chrismation, it is the seal and sign of being elected by God. Like Marriage, it is the

betrothal with the Heavenly Bridegroom, Christ. Like Priesthood, it is a consecration for ministry to God. Like the Eucharist, it is union with Christ. As in Baptism, so in monastic tonsure the person receives a new name and has his sins forgiven. He rejects the sinful life and gives vows of faithfulness to Christ; he takes off a secular robe and puts on a new garment. Being born again, the person assumes infancy anew in order to attain 'to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ'.[\[48\]](#)

The main goal of monasticism is the imitation of Christ whose way of life as described in the Gospel was altogether monastic. He was not married, was free from earthly bonds, had no roof over His head, travelled from place to place, lived in poverty, fasted, and spent nights in prayer. Monasticism is an attempt to come as close as possible to this ideal. It is the quest for sanctity, a search for God as the ultimate goal, the rejection of everything that binds one to earth and prevents one from ascending to heaven.

Monasticism is an angelic order and state achieved in an earthly and soiled body. A monk is one who holds only to the commands of God in every time and place and matter. A monk is one who constantly constrains his nature and unceasingly watches over his senses. A monk is he who keeps his body in chastity, his mouth pure and his mind illumined... Angels are a light for monks, and the monastic life is a light for all men.[\[49\]](#)

Monasticism is an unusual and exceptional way of life: not many are called to it. It is a life entirely and integrally given to God. The monastic renunciation of the world is not a hatred of the world's beauty or of the delights of life; it is rather renunciation of sins and passions, of fleshly desires and lusts, in short, of everything that entered human life after the Fall. The aim of monasticism is a return to that primordial chastity and sinlessness which Adam and Eve possessed in Paradise. The church Fathers called monasticism 'a life according to the Gospel' and 'a true philosophy'. As philosophers sought perfection along the paths of intellectual knowledge, so monks pursue perfection along the paths of ascetical struggle in imitation of Christ.

The entire philosophy of monasticism is expressed in the following words of Christ: 'If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me';[\[50\]](#) 'If any man would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever will save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for My sake will find it';[\[51\]](#) 'He who loves father and mother more than Me is not worthy of Me'.[\[52\]](#) Monasticism is for those who want to be perfect, to follow Christ and to give their life for Him, to sell everything in order to have heavenly treasure. Like a merchant who goes and sells all his possessions in order to buy a pearl, a monk is ready to deny everything in the world in order to acquire Christ. And the sacrifice is worth making, for the reward is great:

Then Peter said in reply, 'Lo, we have left everything and followed You. What then shall we have?' Jesus said to them, 'Truly, I say to you... Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for My name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life'.[\[53\]](#)

Monasticism was a part of the Church's life from very early times, but it came to the force in the fourth century, when persecutions ceased. While during the first three centuries all adherents to Christianity were potential martyrs, in the fourth century the new faith virtually became the state religion of the Roman Empire. Now the quest for martyrdom and sacrifice led people into deep deserts, where ascetics created their 'state within the state'. The deserts of Egypt, Syria and Palestine, once fruitless and lifeless, were watered and populated by monks:

...Cells arose even in the mountains, and the desert was colonised by monks, who came forth from their own people, and enrolled themselves for the citizenship in the heavens... So their cells were in the mountains, filled with holy bands of men who sang psalms, loved reading, fasted, prayed, rejoiced in the hope of things to come, laboured in almsgiving, and preserved love and harmony one with another. And truly it was possible, as it were, to behold a land set by itself, filled with piety and justice. For then there

was neither the evil-doer, nor the injured, nor the reproaches of the tax-gatherer: but instead a multitude of ascetics; and the one purpose of them all was to aim at virtue.[54]

There were three types of monasticism in the fourth and fifth centuries. In cenobitic monasteries monks lived together and gathered in the church several times a day for daily offices. In eremitic communities each monk lived in a separate cell as a hermit; they came to the church once a week in order to receive Holy Communion. In the communities of the type of skete, the monks lived in groups of two or three people. As St John Climacus says, 'The whole monastic state consists of three specific kinds of establishment: either the retirement and solitude of a spiritual athlete, or living in stillness with one or two others, or settling patiently in a community'.[55]

These are three basic vows taken by the monastics: obedience, poverty and chastity. Obedience is a deliberate denial of self-will before God, before the abbot (hegumen) and before every member of the community. The Greek word hypakoe ('obedience') literally means 'hearing', 'listening'. Monastic obedience is hearing what God wants to tell a monk, listening to His will. Humans suffer greatly from their inability to follow God's will and to accept the world around them as it is. People always tend to think of the circumstances of their lives as less than desirable, and of those close to them as less than perfect. They want to change the world around them but, unable to do so, they find no rest, no peace. A monk, on the contrary, teaches himself to accept everything as it is and to receive from the hand of God with the same joy and thanksgiving both consolation and sufferings, health and illness, fortune and misfortune. With this attitude the monk obtains an inner, undisturbed peace that no external circumstances can spoil. 'Glory be to God for everything': these were the words of St John Chrysostom when he died in exile, in sufferings and pains, deprived of his bishopric, driven out of his diocese. Like Christ, Who 'humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even death on the cross',[56] a monk tries to be obedient to God unto the cross, unto death.

Poverty is a deliberate rejection of every earthly possession. This does not necessarily mean that a monk is totally deprived of all material things: it means that he must not be attached to anything earthly. Having inwardly rejected material wealth, he attains that spiritual freedom which is higher than any earthly possession.

The word 'chastity' is used in English to render the Greek sophrosyne, which literally means 'wisdom', 'integrity'. Chastity is not synonymous with celibacy: in monasticism the latter is only an element of the former. Chastity as wisdom and integrity, as life according to the Gospel and abstinence from passions and lusts, is also necessary in marriage. To live in chastity means to have one's entire life oriented to God, to check every thought, word and deed against the Gospel's standards.

As far as celibacy is concerned, in the context of monastic life it is a supra-natural form of existence. Loneliness is incompleteness, a deficiency: in marriage it is overcome through a common life with one's spouse. Monastics are espoused to God Himself. Monasticism is therefore not the opposite of marriage. Rather, it is also a kind of marital union, but not between two human beings: it is a union of the human person with God. 'When love is divided between the world and Christ, it is weak; but it is strong when directed at the One', says St Gregory the Theologian.[57] Love is found at the very heart of both marriage and monasticism, but the object of love is different. A person cannot become a monk unless his love for God is so deep and ardent that he does not want to direct it to anyone but Him.

St Symeon the New Theologian in one of his Hymns speaks of monastic life as being with Christ rather than living alone:

But indeed he who possesses Christ dwelling in him,
How can he be said to be alone, tell me?
For the Father and the Spirit are united with my Christ.
How therefore can we speak of being a solitary
When the monk is united with the Three-in-one?

He is the one who is united with God even if he lives alone,
Even if he lives in a desert, even in a cave...
He who makes a heaven of his cell through virtue,
Contemplates and looks upon the Creator of heaven and earth,
Installed in his cell.
And he adores Him and is united always with the Light which never sets,
The Light without the darkness of evening, the unapproachable Light,
Which never leaves him, never completely wanders from him,
Day or night, whether he eats or drinks,
Not even in his sleep or on the road or in moving from place to place...
So those who by repentance are united with God,
Purify their souls in this world here
And they are considered as solitaries as they are separated from the others...
They communicate with the Father omnipotent...
Their cell is heaven, they indeed are a sun
And the light is on them, the unsetting and divine light...
Only such are monks and solitaries,
Those who alone live with God alone...[\[58\]](#)

There is a widespread view of monasticism as a mode of existence which is deprived of joy, which is tough and sombre. According to the following personal testimony of Archbishop Hilarion (Troitsky), this view is totally misleading:

Monks have a quiet and pure joy, happiness of a pious soul. All that chaos, all that inebriation with life which is commonly called 'delights of life' is something gloomy, something which results in saturation and painful intoxication... We monks weep out of joy, out of compunction, and we thank God... Every monk knows what tears of compunction are, and all earthly delights seem to him poor and deficient compared to these tears... I myself received monastic tonsure and I do not think that I will ever experience again the joy that I experienced then... I was full of joy for two months. My soul was so exalted, so gladdened... It is not by mere chance that in monastic tonsure, when the abbot clothes a newly tonsured monk in his new robe, the following words are said: 'Our brother... is clothed in the robe of joy and spiritual gladness, in order that all his sorrows and perplexity should disappear and be vanquished'... The farther one is from passions, the more joy has one in his heart. The purity of heart is deeply connected with gladness.[\[59\]](#)

Monastic tonsure takes place in the church: it is normally conducted by a bishop or an abbot. The one to be tonsured takes off all his civil clothes, puts on a long white robe and stands before the abbot. Upon making his monastic vows he listens to the abbot's exhortations, after which he receives a new name, is tonsured, and clothed in black monastic vestments. When the rite has finished, each member of the community comes to him, asking: 'What is your name, brother?' The newly-tonsured monk, according to tradition, spends several nights in the church reading the Psalter or the Gospel.

Monasticism is an inner and hidden life. It is absolute and the most radical expression of Christianity as a 'narrow way' leading to the Kingdom of heaven. Monastic detachment and concentration into oneself, however, does not imply egoism or the absence of love for one's neighbour. Being outside of worldly vanity, a monk does not forget his fellow humans, but in the silence of his cell prays for them. St Silouan of Mount Athos says:

There are people who say that monks ought to be of some use in the world, and not eat bread they have not toiled for; but we have to understand the nature of a monk's service and the way in which he has to help the world. A monk is someone who prays for the whole world, who weeps for the whole world; and in this lies his main work... Thanks to monks, prayer continues unceasing on earth, and the whole world profits... St Sergius by fasting and prayer helped the Russian people to free themselves from the Tatar yoke. St Seraphim prayed silently, and the Holy Spirit descended on Motovilov.[\[60\]](#) And this is the task of the monk... Perhaps you will say that nowadays there are no monks like that, who would pray for the

whole world; but I tell you that when there are no men of prayer on the earth, the world will come to an end... The world is supported by the prayers of the saints'.[\[61\]](#)

The church Fathers understood that the transfiguration of the world and people's happiness depend not so much on external circumstances but on people's inner condition. True renovation of the world is only possible in the realm of spiritual life. Thus, neither Christ, nor the apostles nor the church Fathers demanded social changes; rather, all of them called for the inner spiritual transformation of each particular human being. Monks do not attempt to make the world better. They try to make themselves better in order that the world might be transformed from within. 'Save yourself, and thousands around you will be saved', says St Seraphim of Sarov. These words reflect the ultimate goal of monasticism and of Christianity in general. Needless to say, monasticism is not the only way of 'saving oneself', not even the best or the most convenient way. It is one of the ways, like marriage or priesthood, which may lead one to salvation and deification, if one continues along this path to the end.

The name of Jesus

We say 'Jesus', and we rest in a plenitude and totality that can no longer be taken from us. The name of Jesus then becomes a bearer of the whole Christ. It brings us into His total presence. In this total presence are found all the realities towards which the name has served as a means of approach: salvation and pardon, the Incarnation and the Transfiguration, the Church and the Eucharist, the Father and the Spirit. All things then appear to us gathered together in Christ (Ephes.1:10)... If we cling to the name of Jesus, we shall receive the special blessing that the Scripture promises, Have mercy on me as in Thy custom toward them that love Thy name (Ps.119:132). And may the Lord be pleased to say of us what He said of Saul: He is a chosen vessel of Mine, to bear My name (Acts 9:15).

A Monk of the Eastern Church

A conversation with a hermit on the Jesus prayer

We turned our attention downwards and were surprised to see in the distance a man walking with a large knapsack on his shoulders: with slow and laborious strides and his head cast down he descended along the slope of the mountain into a deep scorched hollow... It was astounding and at the same time very moving to see a man in the expanses of this uninhabited country... When we looked closer we could see that it was a man belonging to our monastic rank and we were very overjoyed at the hope of being able to learn from him many useful things concerning his life in the wilderness. When he was not far from us we greeted him in the usual monastic fashion: 'Give us your blessing, Father'. 'May God bless you!'... He was an elder of advanced years... a tall man with a dry body... His beard reached his waist, the hair on his head was completely white like the snow in the mountains and fell over his shoulders... He bore the visible imprint of spiritual sanctification: the eyes of the elder radiated an inexplicable benevolence and sparkled with goodness, sincerity and a kind disposition of the heart... We began to drink tea and dry bread. A remarkable conversation was then struck up between us... 'For the sake of the Lord, please tell us what you have acquired best of all in the wilderness?' The elder's face lit up and a spiritual light shone in his eyes... He answered: 'I have acquired in my heart the Lord Jesus Christ and in Him, beyond any doubt, eternal life, resounding tangibly and with urgency in my heart'... In hearing these unexpected and astounding words, we were greatly amazed, for we had found what we were seeking... 'In what way?' I hurriedly asked. The elder answered: 'Through unceasing prayer to the Lord Jesus Christ... For almost fifteen years I had been saying a verbal prayer only... Then, as a number of years flowed by, this prayer entered my intellect by itself, that is, when my mind became captive of the words of the prayer... And then by the grace of God, prayer of the heart was opened up, the essence of which is the closest union of our heart with the Lord Jesus Christ, felt tangibly in His Name. This exalted and supernatural state is the ultimate stage and limit of the aspirations of every reasonable being made in the image of God and which naturally strives for the highest Prototype. Here a union of the heart with God takes place whereby the Lord penetrates our spirit with His presence as a ray of the sun's light penetrates the glass and through this we are given to taste of the inexpressible bliss of sacred communion with God... One enters the realm of infinite light and in acquiring freedom we abide in God and God in us'.

'On the Mountains of the Caucasus'

Marriage and monasticism

The two complement each other... Both are sacraments of love... It is tempting to make a simple contrast: to say that asceticism and chastity are the characteristics of monasticism, and love the characteristic of marriage. Yet the two states cannot be thus opposed. Married people, as well as monks, are called to the 'narrow way' of ascetic life, to fasting and self-denial; if the monks are martyrs, then so also are the married, as the crowns and hymns and the Marriage service plainly indicate. Perfect love is always a crucified love; yet, for both monks and married Christians, if the cross is voluntarily accepted, it proves a door to resurrection and new life. In the same way, chastity - understood in its proper sense of integrity and integration - is a quality not only of the single but also of the married life. In a sense, marriage includes within itself the characteristic values of monasticism: the monastic vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience - when understood, as they should be, in a positive manner as a way of enabling us to be free to love God and one another - are also applicable to the married life. And if asceticism and chastity are marks of the married life, then love... is a mark of a true monk... If the monk abstains from marriage, this is not because the married state is sinful, but because he personally is called to express his love for God and humankind on a different level... St Irenaeus of Lyons... speaks of the Son and the Holy Spirit as the 'two hands' of God the Father... Marriage and monasticism are likewise the 'two hands' of the Church, the two complementary expressions of one royal priesthood. Each needs the other, and in her mission the Church uses both her hands together.

Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia

[1] Matt.6:6-8.

[2] On Prayer 3 (Philokalia I, p.57).

[3] The Ladder of Divine Ascent 11 (transl. by L.Moore, p.92).

[4] The Power of the Name, The Jesus Prayer in Orthodox Spirituality (Oxford, 1991), p.1.

[5] Homily 65 (The Ascetical Homilies, p.321).

[6] This story is based on the Apophthegmata patrum ('The Sayings of the Desert Fathers'). We give it here in the version which we heard from the late Staretz Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov).

[7] St John Climacus, The Ladder of Divine Ascent 28 (transl. by L.Moore, p.213).

[8] St Isaac the Syrian, Homily 72 (The Ascetical Homilies, p.351).

[9] St Isaac the Syrian, Homily 64 (The Ascetical Homilies, p.316).

[10] St John Climacus, The Ladder of Divine Ascent 15 (transl. by L.Moore, pp.115-116). On the technical terms employed by the Fathers to describe the development of thought into passion see Philokalia I, pp. 365-367.

[11] St Mark the Ascetic, On the Spiritual Law 180 (Philokalia I, p.122).

[12] Gen.3:6.

[13] Zapiski na knigu Bytiya [Notes on the Book of Genesis], pp.57-58.

[14] Evagrius, Texts on Discrimination in Respect of Passions and Thoughts 2 (Philokalia I, p.39).

[15] Or 'by a single word of prayer' (Greek monologistos).

[16] The Ladder of Divine Ascent 28 (transl. by L.Moore, p.214).

[17] On Watchfulness and Holiness 121 (Philokalia I, p.183).

[18] Evagrius, On Prayer 11, 45-47, 70 (Philokalia I, pp.58-63).

[19] 1 Thess.5:17.

[20] A Discourse of Abba Philimon (Philokalia II, pp.347-348).

[21] John 16:23-24.

[22] Mark 16:17-18.

[23] Acts 4:7-12.

[24] The Shepherd, Similitudes 9,14.

[25] For an outline of their teachings on the Jesus prayer, see A Monk of the Eastern Church [Archimandrite Lev Gillet], The Jesus Prayer (New York, 1995).

[26] Na gorakh Kavkaza [On the Mountains of the Caucasus] (Batalpashinsk, 1910), p.16.

[27] Cited in Na gorakh Kavkaza, p.16.

[28] Its original title is Otkrovennye rasskazy strannika dukhvnomu svojemu otzu [Sincere tales of a pilgrim to his spiritual father] (Kazan, 1884).

- [29] 1 Thess.5:17.
- [30] The Way of a Pilgrim, translated by R.M.French (London, 1954), pp.17-18.
- [31] St John Climacus, The Ladder of Divine Ascent 28 (transl. by L.Moore, p.214).
- [32] Cited in O molitve Iisusovoy [On the Jesus prayer] (Sortavala, 1936), p.109.
- [33] For a more detailed discussion of the theme see Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia, The Power of the Name, pp.20-25.
- [34] The treatise is ascribed to St Symeon the New Theologian, but most modern scholars are inclined to date it to the thirteenth century.
- [35] The Greek text is in I.Hausherr, La Methode d'oraison hesychaste, Orientalia Christiana Periodica 36 (Rome, 1927), pp.150-172.
- [36] Matt.7:7.
- [37] A footnote in the Russian translation of the Writings by St Symeon the New Theologian, vol.2 (Moscow, 1990), p.188.
- [38] Cf. Gen.5:24; 6:9; 17,1 et al.
- [39] Evagrius, On Prayer 61 (Philokalia I, p.62).
- [40] I.e. the intellect.
- [41] St Gregory the Theologian, Oration 27,3.
- [42] Cited in Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia, The Orthodox Church, p.310.
- [43] The Power of the Name, pp.23-24.
- [44] Gal.4:6.
- [45] Cf. 1 Cor.12:6.
- [46] On Commandments and Doctrines... 113 (Philokalia IV, p.238).
- [47] See Dionysius the Areopagite, The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy 6,2 ('Mystery of the consecration of a monk'). Cf. J.Meyendorff, Byzantine Theology, pp.191-192.
- [48] Eph.4:13.
- [49] St John Climacus, The Ladder of Divine Ascent 1 and 26 (transl. by L.Moore, pp.4 and 167).
- [50] Matt.19:21.
- [51] Matt.16:24-25.
- [52] Matt.10:37.
- [53] Matt.19:27-29.
- [54] St Athanasius of Alexandria, The Life of St Anthony 15 and 44.
- [55] The Ladder of Divine Ascent 1 (transl. by L.Moore, p.10).
- [56] Phil.2:8.
- [57] St Gregory Nazianzen, Ethical poetry 1 (PG 37,563).
- [58] Hymn 27,18-74 (SC 174,280). Cf. the words of Plotinus quoted in Chapter I above: 'a flight of alone to the Alone' (Enn.6,9,11).
- [59] Archbishop Hilarion (Troitsky), Christianstva net bez Tserkvi, pp.181-187.
- [60] See Bishop Kallistos (Ware), The Orthodox Church, pp.131-132.
- [61] Cited in Archimandrite Sophrony, St Silouan, pp.407-408.

http://en.hilarion.orthodoxia.org/6_21

Hilarion Alfeyev was born on July 24, 1966 in Moscow.

Education

From 1972 to 1982 he studied violin, piano and composition at the Moscow Gnessins School and from 1983 to 1986 at the Moscow State Conservatoire.

In 1989 he graduated by correspondence from the Moscow Theological Seminary and in 1991 from the Moscow Theological Academy, with the degree of Master of Theology.

From 1991 to 1993 he taught Homiletics, Dogmatic Theology, New Testament Studies and Byzantine Greek at the Moscow Theological Academy, St Tikhon's Theological Institute and St John the Theologian's Orthodox University.

From 1993 to 1995 he studied at the University of Oxford (UK) under the supervision of Bishop Kallistos Ware. In 1995 he completed his doctoral thesis on 'St Symeon the New Theologian and Orthodox Tradition' and was awarded the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Church activity

In January 1987 he entered the Monastery of the Holy Spirit in Vilnius, Lithuania, where he was tonsured as a monk on 19 June, ordained deacon on 21 June and ordained priest on 19 August the same year. Until 1991 he served as parish priest in Lithuania, including two years as dean of Annunciation Cathedral in Kaunas.

From 1995 to 2001 Hilarion Alfeyev served as Secretary for Inter-Christian Affairs of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate. He also taught part time at Smolensk and Kaluga Theological Seminaries (Russia), at St Vladimir's and St Herman's Theological Seminaries (USA) and at Cambridge University (UK).

On 27 December 2001 he was elected Bishop, and on 14 January 2002 consecrated by His Holiness Alexy II, Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia, and 10 other hierarchs. He first served as an Assistant Bishop in the Diocese of Sourozh in Great Britain until the Holy Synod decided, only a few months later, that he was to be nominated, on 17 July 2002, as Head of the Representation of the Russian Orthodox Church to the European Institutions in Brussels.

On 7 May 2003 he was appointed Bishop of Vienna and Austria, administrator of the Diocese of Budapest and Hungary, in addition to his position in Brussels, which he continues to hold.

Scholarly work

Bishop Hilarion is author of more than 600 publications, including four monographs in English: St Symeon the New Theologian and Orthodox Tradition (Oxford University Press, 2000), welcomed by the press, The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian (Cistercian Publications, Kalamazoo, MI, 2000), The Mystery of Faith. An Introduction to the Teaching and Spirituality of the Orthodox Church (Darton, Longman and Todd, 2002), Orthodox Witness Today (WCC Publications, 2006).

Apart from his doctoral degree in philosophy from Oxford, Bishop Hilarion also holds a doctorate in theology from St Sergius Orthodox Theological Institute in Paris, which was awarded to him in 1999. In February 2005 he was elected a Privat-Dozent of the University of Fribourg (Switzerland).

Musical activity

Bishop Hilarion is author of numerous musical compositions. His "St Matthew Passion", grand oratorio for soloists, choir and orchestra, received standing ovation at its performances at the Great Hall of Moscow Conservatory (27 March 2007), at the Auditorium Conciliazione, Rome (29 March 2007), and at St Patrick's Cathedral, Melbourne (28 September 2007). Equally well received was his "Christmas Oratorio", performed in Washington, Boston and New York (18-20 December 2007) and later in Moscow (7 and 15 January 2008).