

Magnificat

Special Issue
Vocations

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An Introduction



We are a Catholic Monastery of the Byzantine Rite, under the jurisdiction of the Eparch of Chicago, and belonging to the Ukrainian Metropolis in the United States of America, which is in union with the Pope of Rome, supreme pastor of the universal Church. We embrace Evangelical poverty, chastity, obedience, and stability of life, according to the Rule of Saint Benedict and the traditions of the Christian East. In our skete at Jacob's Falls, on the shore of Lake Superior in Michigan's Keweenaw Peninsula, we devote ourselves to a common life of prayer and work for the praise, love, and service of God and for the upbuilding of His Kingdom through the arts.



According to His Will

...monasticism...even in the throes of the major upheavals of history, basically remained the bearer not only of cultural continuity but, above all, of fundamental religious and moral values, ultimate orientations of man. In so far as it was a pre-political and supra-political force, monasticism became the wellspring of ever new and necessary rebirths.

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger
(now Pope Benedict XVI)

Discourse on Europe's Spiritual Foundation
May 13, 2004

Moreover, in the East, monasticism was not seen merely as a separate condition, proper to a precise category of Christians, but rather as a reference point for all the baptized, according to the gifts offered to each by the Lord; it was presented as a symbolic synthesis of Christianity.

Pope John Paul II
Apostolic Letter, "Orientale Lumen"
May 2, 1995

The monk would hardly disagree with the assessments of these great minds.

Even his cursory reading of European history reveals the crucial role played by monasteries in preserving the light of learning following the social and political collapse of Greco-Roman civilization in the West. A somewhat deeper study uncovers the developments in agriculture, architecture, art, and music, to say nothing of the various ecclesiastical reforms, monasteries contributed to Western civilization. Understanding the impermanence of worldly arrangements, the monk knows that similar times may come again.

He likewise knows that the whole spiritual and theological perspective of the Christian East has been shaped by the monastic experience, that the faithful look to him for spiritual guidance and as a model for their own living of the faith. He understands that the glorious Eastern liturgical services, forged in monasteries over the centuries, and enshrining the essence of ancient Christian

belief, have allowed the faith to be passed on despite generations of Islamic oppression or domination by atheistic governments. He can read the signs of the times; he knows such inner strength will be needed again.

Yet, true as all these observations are, they do not constitute a valid motive for embracing the monastic life. One does not become a monk specifically intending to preserve learning, advance culture, develop liturgy, write mystical theology, or serve as guide and role model for the faithful. The monks of times past were probably not at all aware that they were accomplishing great things; certainly they did not set out to do them. A witness from a thousand and a half years ago reveals a motivation much simpler – and more profound:

'I wish to serve God in your monastery through the discipline of the Rule read to me.' When the Abbot says in reply: 'And this is your pleasure?' the future disciple continues: 'First it is God's, so then also mine.'

The Rule of the Master
LXXXIX: 8-9

The monk is one who has come to believe that the monastic way of life is pleasing to God. He has this on good authority. The various monastic renunciations and observances are well attested in scripture (cf. Mt. 19:12; Mk. 12:25; Lk. 5:35; 14:33; 18:1) and have been followed by many among the Christian faithful from the very beginning. Indeed, the descriptions of the first Christian community given in The Acts of the Apostles (2:42-46; 4:32-35) with few changes in wording could easily apply to many observant monastic communities of today.

Monastic life is not just another career choice, a way of getting ahead in the world and of providing for a secure future. In reality, it is not a choice at all, but an act of obedience. It is a response to God's call to abandon even the good things of the world and to follow Him alone – a radical act for which He has promised great rewards (cf. Mt. 19:27-29).

This commitment is often summed up in one word: conversion, a turning back to God. Turning away from sin, from his self will, from his personal pleasures, the monk undertakes penance for his own failings and those of others, invokes the Lord's mercy upon himself and upon this whole weary world of ours, and strives to conform his own will to that of God.

The endeavor is not altogether altruistic; while motivated by the love of God, the monk knows that conformance to the Divine will bring him true peace, and he remains ever mindful of the Lord's promise of eternal life. None the less, the undertaking does entail many serious difficulties. The monk is comforted to know that the Lord, in assigning a task, always provides the necessary graces for its accomplishment. Among them he counts especially the traditions handed on by those who have gone before him.

Christian monasticism began to appear as a distinctive movement within the Church during the third century in the deserts of Egypt and Palestine. The renunciations practiced by these first monks were not innovations; they had been counseled by the Gospels and practiced by various Christians from the beginning. What was different was the separation of these monks from the world at large and from the majority of Christians.

In the beginning all Christians had of necessity lived to some extent separated from the hostile and pagan world around them; but, as Christianity gained acceptance and, in the fourth century, Imperial favor, the separation began to blur. The world rushed to embrace Christianity, and many Christians eagerly embraced the world. As Christians increasingly abandoned fervor, the more fervent among them retired to the margins of society and then into the desert. In their striving after peace, solitude, and the contemplation of God, the desert was their ally; so, too, were mountains, swamps, and hidden valleys for monks of other times and places. In the harshness of the desolate and forsaken places of the earth, the monk finds the Purgatory of his

sins and seeks the Paradise where he might walk with God.

Thus, we have come to the shore of Lake Superior and for nearly thirty years have labored to build a monastery in this beautiful, but marginal and difficult, place. Despite setbacks, trials and frustrations, we have persevered, and the land has been good to us. Here we have put down roots and drawn sustenance.

Summer's stream of visitors has prospered the work of our hands, spread knowledge of us far and wide, and engendered generosity for accomplishing the seemingly impossible task. Above all, this good land has provided peace



and manifold blessings of spirit.

Our area is not dry, but for much of the year it is fierce – and nearly deserted. The severity of its winters walls us in solitude, focuses our lives, and keeps us mindful of our dependence on the Lord's never failing mercy. The Great Lake, in its many and changing moods, has been a never ending source of wonder and consolation, and all around we see evidence of the Divine. In the elemental fury of a storm, the unique beauty of each sunset, the miracle of bud, leaf, blossom, and berry, and the occasional glimpses of other creatures that share this land with us, we see God shining through His universe.

May He continue to guide and protect us as we seek to live out His will.



The Founder

If you seek perfection, go, sell your possessions, and give to the poor. You will then have treasure in heaven. Afterward, come back and follow Me.

(Mt. 19-21)

Some two and a half centuries after the Lord spoke these words recorded in the Gospels, another rich young man heard them read out in the parish church of his small Egyptian village. Anthony was then barely twenty years of age and, by the standards of his time, was, indeed, very wealthy, having inherited an estate of rich farm land on the recent death of his parents. Understanding the Lord's words as being meant for him, he immediately went home and gave the best of his land to his neighbors. He sold the rest of the estate and gave the proceeds to the poor, except for a little he thought he would need to provide for himself and his young sister. Some time later, he again heard the Lord speak to him in church: **Enough of worrying about tomorrow. Let tomorrow take care of itself** (Mt. 6:34). Giving away the remainder of his wealth, he placed his sister in the care of a "house of maidens", and withdrew into solitude.

Anthony lived out his call to perfection for more than eighty years afterward, dying finally at the age of one hundred and five. He endured long solitary periods in the desert, but at other times he allowed disciples to gather around him, instructing them on the ascetic life, and forming them into monasteries. He exhorted martyrs during the last persecution before the Peace of the Church and preached against the Arian heresy in the next generation. He won undying fame as a holy man and wonderworker; the story of his life, as written by St. Athanasius, who had apparently spent time as one of his disciples, received wide circulation in the ancient world and inspired many to embrace the ascetic struggle. In both East and West, St. Anthony is venerated as the Father of Monks.

Yet, St. Anthony cannot in any real sense be called the founder of monasticism. It already existed when he took up the struggle. His visits

to other ascetics and hermits during the early years of his conversion attest to its flourishing, even in rural Egypt. And the "house of maidens" to which he entrusted his sister could just as easily be described, using the terminology of later times, as a convent of nuns.

Indeed, Christianity seems to have always had its monks and nuns:

The community of believers were of one mind and heart. None of them ever claimed anything as his own; rather, everything was held in common. With power the Apostles bore witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great respect was showed to them by all; nor was there anyone needy among them, for all who owned property or houses sold them and donated the proceeds. They used to lay them at the feet of the Apostles to be distributed to everyone according to his need.

(Acts 4:32-35)

This ideal way of life was no doubt lived out in many early Christian communities, at least by special groups. Such groups may well have exercised other asceticisms, as well. St. Paul's frequent mention of virgins and widows seems to indicate their already established special status within the Church.

By the second century, loose groups of ascetics had gathered around parish churches in many places and were held in special esteem by the Christian community. These informal groupings of ascetics persisted for a fairly long time. One such group of pious souls in central Italy received St. Benedict in his flight from the world around 500 AD.

What distinguishes the monasticism of St. Anthony and his fourth century brothers from its earlier forms is its radical separation from the world.

Previously, all Christians had been to some extent separated from the world. Even when they were not actively persecuted, Christians had to avoid most aspects of public life. Military or government positions, academic posts, court appearances, even theatrical and sporting events



were likely to occasion some pagan observance of the State religion which an observant Christian could not tolerate.

The conversion of the Emperor Constantine changed all that. At its beginning of the fourth century Christianity had been outlawed, punishable by death; by its end it was the official religion of the Roman Empire. The Faith had become a road to social advancement; thousands of lukewarm souls flooded in.

Bishops began to be given the duties and responsibilities of Roman magistrates; often they assumed their life style, as well. The office of once humble shepherds came to enjoy prestige, wealth, and power; it came to be sought after by the ambitious. Even for the sincere, the newfound influence brought a temptation to rely on political and social solutions for spiritual problems. The Kingdom of God was often too closely identified with the worldly realm.

By fleeing the world and its honors, the monks bore striking witness to the transcendence of the Christian message. Their heroic asceticism, their radical living out of the Gospel, and their rejection of worldly standards were seen as a new martyrdom. The blood of martyrs had been the seed of the Church; the witness and prayers of monks now kept its spirit alive.

Devoted to works of the Spirit, they also had great practical impact on the Church and the surrounding world during the ensuing centuries. In the West, copying books, developing new farming techniques, and converting barbarian tribes, they preserved civilization in the face of general governmental and social collapse.

In the East, where the Roman Empire endured another thousand years, monasteries never attained to the wealth and power their Western counterparts sometimes held, yet their influence, particularly in the spiritual realm was tremendous. The great Fathers of the Eastern Church were all monks, and its theology bears a definite mystical and monastic stamp. Moreover, despite hierarchical timidity and imperial might,

the monks resisted heresy, even to the point of death, and zealously preserved the faith that had been handed on to them. Through their valor the Church in the East remained orthodox and developed its distinctive characteristics.

Monasticism in the Christian East has retained its primitive form. Eastern monasteries remain mostly independent units, each living out the common tradition in its own unique manner, under the protection of the local bishop. The great Eastern monastic rules are mostly exhortation and counsel rather than specific legislation. Thus, while continuing to be lived out in various manners and in differing circumstances, Eastern monasticism is not divided into separate orders, each looking back to the charisms of its particular founder. The East knows but one Order of Monks and but one source of monastic life: the Gospel of our Lord God and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Hearing the Lord's words and heeding His commands, certain Christians in every age have devoted themselves to constant prayer without losing heart (cf. Lk. 18:1). They have renounced sexual activity for the sake of the Kingdom (cf. Mt. 19:12) and have undertaken to live like angels in heaven (cf. Mk. 12:25). They have given up their possessions that they might be true disciples of Christ (cf. Lk. 14:33). They have fasted in the Bridegroom's absence (cf. Lk. 5:35) and kept vigil, awaiting the day of His return. Denying themselves, they have shouldered the Cross and followed in His footsteps (cf. Mt. 16:24).

Their striving after a particular perfection in no way lessens the perfection required of all believers (cf. Mt. 5:48). Rather, it encourages, supports, and fills out the holiness of all God's people.

Monasticism stands at the very heart of the Church. Its one true founder is Christ, the Lord, and its life breath is the Holy Spirit. Together with the hierarchy, it is guardian and guarantor of Holy Tradition. It remains, even in the midst of these frenetic times, a powerful beacon of faith and a true witness that the Lord's Kingdom is not of this world.



Following the Star

Quite a few years ago, not long after we began the monastic endeavor at Jacob's Falls, a local parochial elementary school asked us to participate in a "career day" for their students. Always eager to spread word about the monastic life to interested persons of any age, three of us piled into our decrepit vehicle one cold, snowy morning shortly after the first of the year and made the seventy mile trip to speak to the youngsters. The older children devoted their attention to the pilot and sky diver who were also on hand; we thoroughly enjoyed ourselves answering the questions of bright eyed first and second graders.

Some months later, in warmer and more congenial times, the school principal visited the shop. Across the counter Sister again thanked us for our part in the event. The children, too, had appreciated the encounter, she said; when asked what he had liked best about the day, one seven year old had responded: *The visit from the*

three Wise Men! We chuckled at the youthful conflation of three robed and bearded men with the events surrounding the recently completed celebrations of Christmas and Epiphany, yet, as we ponder the matter over the years, we cannot but be struck with a sense of bemused wonder: *Out of the mouths of babes...*

We did not consider ourselves very wise; certainly our personal knowledge and expertise had brought us no great respect or influence in the world; nor did we have many gifts to offer. Yet, speaking to us through the many and varied circumstances of our daily existence, the Lord had called us to come to do Him homage and offer the totality of our lives. He placed before us the vision and task of building this monastery as our own particular guiding star. We stepped out in faith and began to follow.

Thus, we came to this windy and rocky shore nearly thirty years ago; thus we remain here to-

day. The vision and task shine brightly before us; we continue to follow the way. The pilgrimage has at times been exhilarating, at times tedious. Though sometimes clearly defined, the route was more often obscure; never could we see very far ahead. It has taken more than a few unexpected and startling turns. Yet, in sight of the star, we move forward, and the journey's marvels continue to unfold.

We came with few illusions. We knew the life would be difficult, and we had no great confidence in our own abilities to cope with hardship. We knew we were following in the footsteps of giants; we had no thought of rivaling the heroic asceticism of the Desert Fathers or the organizational genius of St. Benedict; we took them as guides, and trusted that the Lord would provide us the strength to carry out His will. We doggedly applied ourselves to the tasks as He set them before us.

In the beginning it was strictly a matter of survival. The simple tasks of hauling water, fetching firewood, and picking berries kept us alive and consumed most of our time. Common prayer and the normal domestic tasks took the rest. There was little opportunity for planning and working out strategy. We knew where we were going, but we did not know how to get there. We took comfort in an aged priest's final words to us, penned just a few weeks before his passing: *It is the Lord's work, and He will have to do it.*

The details of building a monastery were well beyond our abilities; we trusted that God would bring it about in His own fashion in due course. Our task was to persevere in prayer, to learn as much as possible, and to do what was necessary to stay alive. Through it all, we struggled to maintain authenticity in our monastic life.

Christian monasticism flows directly from the Gospel of our Lord God and Savior, Jesus Christ, and its distinctive qualities have marked Christian life from the beginning.

During its first three centuries, Christianity was illegal and persecuted by the Roman state.

Although the persecutions were localized and sporadic and there were relatively long periods of peace, Christians were always liable to death if denounced and tried. Many shed their blood rather than renounce their belief in the saving life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Through their witness many others embraced the faith. **The blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church.**

For its own survival, the Christian community had to keep itself somewhat separate from the rest of society and maintain a degree of secrecy about its activities. In these clandestine circumstances, the more zealous among them – the ascetic or consecrated virgin – would hardly stand out from the mass of believers. In the Fourth Century, however, once the persecutions were lifted and Christianity began to enjoy Imperial favor, the separation and secrecy were no longer necessary. Converts, seeking some social advantage, began to flood in; the world was embracing Christianity; sadly, many Christians also embraced the world. As the general fervor of Christians grew cold, the more fervent among them started to take refuge in the deserts of Egypt and Palestine. Monasticism began to develop into a distinct movement within the Church.

Although it has been lived in many forms in the centuries since, and the wisdom of the Church has moderated much that was excessive in their zeal, Christian monasticism continues to look back to these first Desert Fathers and Mothers for inspiration and renewal. Their single minded pursuit of asceticism and constant prayer, their radical flight from society into harsh and desolate places, and their enthusiastic embrace of poverty struck their contemporaries as a new form of martyrdom. The witness of their total commitment to the Gospel moved others to increased fervor in their own practice of the faith and drew many into the fold. Without any pastoral role they had a profound effect upon the complexion and history of the Church.

The Keweenaw Peninsula is hardly the Egyptian desert, and the world is much changed since the Fourth Century. Yet our own day

seems no better off spiritually; zeal in the Church is at a low ebb, and the world around us becomes increasingly hostile to Christian belief. The Lord's call to monastic life remains as vital as ever. This land offers its share of hardships and trials; winters bring isolation; life here has not been without its moments of desolation. But the Lord keeps the star before us, and the bleak winters also bring a profound rejuvenating peace; moreover, He has sent many consolations along the way.

Through it all, as we kept ourselves centered on the tasks at hand, He has moved the work forward. Most apparent to passers by has been the growth of our facilities. Various additions over the years, culminating with the completion some years ago of our new golden-domed church, have increased our monastic structures by more than fifteen fold since our arrival. Our business and production facili-



ties have expanded, as well. Much more remains to be done. Each project completed points to another requiring attention. The transformation is ongoing, and we continue to trust in the Lord's guiding and provident hand.

But a monastery is more than just buildings. It is, above all, a community of like minded individuals, sharing a common life and working and praying together in harmony. Here, too, the Lord has granted increase, though not as quickly or as abundantly as we might have liked. A postulant arrived this fall; we number six as we live out our twenty ninth winter in this holy place. It is humbling to note that the younger monks were all children, babes in arms, or as yet unborn when the Lord first called us to this pilgrimage. May He grant peace and joy to them and to those others He, even now, is calling to join them, as, together, we follow His star.



Embracing the Life

A man aspiring to our life normally initiates contact in writing, telling us some pertinent facts about himself and how he is experiencing the call to monastic life. If it seems indicated, he will visit the monastery for some days or a week to deepen his acquaintance with its way of life. When opportune, a further stay of several weeks or a month as a candidate will give direction as to whether he should be received as a postulant. After a postulancy of at least six months, he may be clothed as a novice, the first canonical stage of monastic life.

The Rite of Investiture by which this is accomplished, as detailed in the Euchologion published in 1902 by the Kiev-caves Lavra, the first and greatest monastery of Ukraine, adds only fifteen or twenty minutes to the normal course of Vespers. Its texts consist of a few brief prayers, Psalms 26 (27) and 15 (16), a Troparion and a Theotokion, the presentation of the new novice to the community, and a short exhortation to fervor and obedience. Enshrined by the texts, two symbolic actions convey its essence.

First, invoking the name of the Holy Trinity, the Hegumen cuts the Postulant's hair in the form of a cross and then shears it off completely while Psalm 15 (16) is sung. Then, in silence, having put off the clothing he has worn during his Postulancy, he receives from the hand of the Hegumen

our common tunic and belt, the beginning of the monastic habit. The new Novice then learns the name by which he will be known in monastic life.

These actions have long marked entrance into the monastic state. Tonsure, the shearing of the hair, was known prior to the seventh century, and a distinctive monastic dress as early as the fourth. Once it became usual for adult converts to receive a new name at Baptism, their rebirth into Christian life, a name change also came to be customary upon beginning monastic life. Monastic life is an ongoing conversion, and the rites that mark its beginning are in some ways analogous to Baptism itself.

Thus, tonsure, which is symbolic of setting aside worldly cares, a renunciation of pride and human vanity, corresponds to the renunciations that precede the baptismal bath and anointing of the Sacrament. And, as the white garment bestowed at Baptism symbolizes

newness of life in Christ Jesus, the black monastic habit represents the life of penance undertaken to restore the baptismal purity we all lose so quickly. Even those who receive the habit in their youth already have much to mourn and repent of.

Despite the venerable antiquity of the simple rites that mark its beginning, the conversion required by monastic life is not so easy as a haircut

There is one thing I ask of the Lord,
for this I long,
To live in the house of the Lord, all the days
of my life,
to savor the sweetness of the Lord,
to behold His temple.
For there He keeps me safe in His tent
in the day of evil.
He hides me in the shelter of His tent,
on a rock He sets me safe.
And now my head shall be raised
above my foes who surround me,
and I shall offer within His tent
a sacrifice of joy.
I will sing and make music for the Lord.
(Ps. 26: 4-6)



The postulant is led into the temple carrying a lighted candle.

and a change of clothes. It requires constant effort and entails more than a few moments of hardship and loneliness. A generous response to the Lord's call to abandon even the good things of the world to follow Him alone, it is a commitment to exhaust oneself in His service, to do penance for personal sins and the sins of others, and to be untiring in singing God's praise, invoking His unfailing mercy upon this weary world of ours. Unaided, such an arduous undertaking would be impossible to fulfill; but the Lord, in assigning a difficult task, always provides the graces for its completion, and He has promised great rewards for all who choose to leave everything and follow Him (cf. Mt. 19:27-29).

The Rite of Investiture is confident, serene, and gently joyful. The singing of Psalm 26 immediately after the call to worship sets the tone of what is to follow. With God as our help and stronghold, we have nothing to fear; He keeps us safe from all the terrors that surround us, His instructions lead us along straight paths, and He will never abandon or forsake us. We ask of Him only to live in His house throughout our life, to share the joy of singing His praises and calling upon His mercy, and to behold the glory of His face.

During the tonsure, Psalm 15 continues the calm expression of peaceful happiness. The hairs of his head, falling beneath the shears, symbolize the Postulant's severing of all his earthly attachments and



the shedding of his possessions and attendant cares. It is of little import: worldliness, with its many false gods, only brings sorrow; our happiness lies in God alone, and He is our goal. The course ahead is a welcome delight; through it He shows us the path of life and leads us into His presence where we know the fullness of joy and happiness forever.

We have found this joy and happiness in the monastic observance of our community. We are pleased to share it with other men who are genuinely called to this life, and we welcome inquiries from those who have intimations of the calling. Through the experiences and conversations of a discernment retreat we begin assessing the signs of its presence.

Eastern Canon Law prescribes three years of Novitiate prior to Monastic Consecration and perpetual solemn vows. Although no vows

have as yet been spoken or promises made, and it is possible for the Novice to withdraw or be dismissed for grave reasons, the Novitiate is not seen as a time of discernment. Such deliberations are to be made during the preceding months of Candidacy and Postulancy; Novitiate is undertaken only when the monastic vocation is reasonably certain. It is a time, rather, of learning and spiritual preparation for the permanent commitment of Monastic Consecration.

Soon the new Novice begins to receive additional responsibilities and duties. He is given a greater role in the Services and assumes a larger share in the many burdens of the monastery's life and work. Some he may find difficult, distasteful, or annoying, but through them he continues to learn and grow, and, with the help and guidance of his brothers, he attains in due course to full stature in monastic life.



We give thanks to You, O Lord our God, Who, according to your great mercy, have delivered Your servant out of the vain life of the world and have summoned him to this honorable obligation. Count him worthy of living this angelic life in a way that always pleases you: protect him from the snares of the Devil; preserve his soul and body pure even unto death, and make him worthy to become your holy temple. Teach him always to remember you and your commandments, and grant to him humility, love, and meekness.

From the Rite of Investiture



*Behold, I present to you before God this new member of our family.
Instruct him to live in the fear of God and in every virtue by your words and example.
Watch carefully, that his soul not suffer destruction because of your carelessness;
for you will give answer to God for it on the Day of Judgment.*

Psalm 15

Preserve me, O God, I take refuge in you.

I say to the Lord: You are my God.

My happiness lies in You alone.

He has put into my heart a marvelous love
for the faithful ones who dwell in His land.

Those who choose other gods increase their sorrows.

Never will I offer their offerings of blood.

Never will I take their names upon my lips.

O Lord, it is You who are my portion and cup;

it is You Yourself who are my prize.

The lot marked out for me is my delight:
welcome indeed the heritage that falls to me.

I will bless the Lord who gives me council,
who even at night directs my heart.

I keep the Lord ever in my sight:
since He is at my right hand, I shall stand firm.

And so my heart rejoices, my soul is glad;
even my body shall rest in safety.

For you will not leave my soul among the dead,
nor let your beloved know decay.

You will show me the path of life,
the fullness of joy in your presence,
at your right hand happiness forever.



Ο ΆΓΙΟΣ

ΒΕΝΕΔΙΚΤΟΣ

ΑΓΙΟΥ ΟΥΡΕ
ΔΑΠΤΖ

Ἡ ΠΑΡΜΑΡΓΙΑ
ΜΗΤΗΡ ἔΣΤΙ
ΤΗΣ ΠΟΡΝ.
ΕΙΔΕ ΚΑΙ Ο ΚΑ.
ΤΩΝ ΠΑΤΕΡΩΝ
ΔΥΝΑΤΑΙ
ΚΡΑΤΕΙΝ
ΠΙΘΕΝΕ

The Prayers of Our Holy Fathers

The Troparion prescribed for the Rite of Investiture is frequently encountered over the course of the liturgical year. It is common to commemorations of various monastic fathers and to those of many bishops, as well. That it is also sung here, at the entrance upon monastic life, is indicative of the Eastern Christian understanding of the calling.

The monk sees his call as issuing from God's love and mercy, His compassionate plan for his life. The call is a grace in itself; it is not something the monk has earned or deserved, nor can he ever be worthy of it by his own efforts. Only by his ongoing response to God's continuing blessings can he possibly hope to live out its demands. His vocation is not of his own doing; it is purely and simply a gift.

Moreover, his monastic life and observance are, likewise, not of his own making. They, too, are gifts that have been handed down to him. Authentic monasticism is not something we improve or create for ourselves; rather, we receive it from others, who have, in turn, received from still others who have had it from others before them. It has always been thus.

Archimandrite Boniface, the monastic father from whom we received the holy habit, and who handed monastic life down to us, was fond of describing monasticism as a great stream that had its source in the Gospel and has continued to flow from the time of the Apostles down to our own day. Alternately, he would compare it to a great procession of monks and nuns, stretching from Apostolic times to the present, each one receiving the monastic way of life from those who had gone before and, in turn, passing it on to those who came after. No beginning to the stream or procession can be discerned, save in the Gospel, itself.

Even the great monastic founders and lights of the past all first received monastic life from someone else. St. Anthony the Great, an Egyptian Desert Father of the third and fourth century, revered in East and West as the Father of Monks, upon receiving the call, sought out various ascetics in his locale, to live near them and to learn from them their holy way of life. St. Benedict, likewise, though considered Father of Western Monasticism, was not the first monk in the West. After fleeing the world, he lived for a time with a community of pious men and women gathered around a local church and later, having taken up his abode in a cave, received the monastic habit from the priest-monk Romanus.

However great their contribution to the understanding or spread of monastic life, they, too, walked in the procession, their teaching flowed into the stream. So, it was also with the many venerable monastic teachers we remember in our prayers throughout the course of the year – and with

the many more whose names we do not now know. We stand as recipients of the way of life they have handed on; their wisdom has swollen the stream to a mighty river that waters our souls with the vivifying grace of the Holy Spirit.

With investiture, we gratefully and humbly take our place at the end of this great procession of holy monks and nuns. We set ourselves to drink deeply of the living stream of monastic tradition, to enlighten our hearts and minds by its wisdom, so that, by divine grace, we may worthily live the monastic life, make it our own, and hand it on to those who will, in due course, step into line behind us. Perhaps, in God's great mercy, we may add to the stream of monastic wisdom some small insight that will be of aid to one who follows.

O God of our fathers
You always deal with us
according to Your everlasting compassion,
take not Your mercy away from us,
but through the prayers of our fathers,
guide our lives along the ways of peace.

Troparion for Monastic Investiture

Monastic Consecration

Having persevered through novitiate, with God's grace, the monk may definitively embrace our life and receive monastic consecration. With this permanent commitment and consecration, he is raised to the rank of stavrophore, or cross-bearing, monk and takes his place among the elders of the Skete. He possesses a deliberative voice in those decisions requiring the consent of their Council and has the right and duty of participating in Abbatial elections; in accord with the Eastern monastic tradition that was handed on to us, he is henceforth addressed as "Father".

For the monk, the joy we all experience at such occasions must be tempered with a healthy dose of trepidation. Monastic consecration is not a reward for having survived three years formation as a novice. It is not an end, but a beginning; and the trials and labor of novitiate are merely training for the greater struggles that lie ahead.

The rite of consecration, itself, makes abundantly clear, that it is not the promise that brings merit, but, rather, the fidelity with which it is carried out. The monk is about to make a very big promise. Prostrate before the Royal Doors of the Altar, he is painfully aware of his past failings and present weakness, and he understands that his own strength is insufficient for living out the commitment. Yet, like the Prodigal Son seeking a return to his Father's house, he also knows that God is merciful and loving and that He gives the strength needed to carry out the tasks He has assigned. Trusting God's grace will be sufficient for him, he places in His hands any fears he may have concerning his own inadequacies.

For this reason, the rite of Monastic Consecration does not focus on what have come to be called vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience – indeed, they are not specifically mentioned as such. Rather, responding verbally to the Hegumen's series of questions concerning his understanding and commitment to live the various aspects of monastic life, the monk affirms that he will live them out *with the help of God*. By far the greater part of the service is devoted to prayers, on the part of the Hegumen and congregation, that the help be given. Monastic consecration is not the filing of a contract, it is a solemn blessing for imparting the graces needed to live a particular state of life.

The graces are manifold and conveyed in diverse and continuing ways. Principal among these, we must count the Hegumen's many long prayers of petition and blessing during the Service, as well as his various exhortations which, if taken to heart and put into practice, will guide the monk through difficulties and encourage him in the face of trials.

Only after these prayers and exhortations have been given, and after the monk has three times assured and demonstrated that he is approaching the commitment freely, does the Hegumen administer him the monastic Tonsure, shearing his hair as a token of his having renounced the world and all its enticements, and as a restraint of his personal will and of his fleshly desires.

This ritual entrance into the monastic state having been accomplished, the Hegumen blesses and bestows on the monk the various articles of the monastic habit, beginning with the wooden cross which the new stavrophore (cross-bearing)

Receive me with open arms,
O my Savior.
I have spent my life as a prodigal:
Beholding the wealth
of Your inexhaustible mercy,
do not despise my heart.
For to you, O Lord,
I cry in sorrow:
Father, I have sinned
against heaven and You.

Troparion for Monastic Consecration



*Our wise God, like a loving Father, beholds your humility and sorrow.
As you prostrate from your heart before Him, He receives you as the prodigal son.*

monk will henceforth wear under his clothing. Each article of the habit symbolizes some aspect of the monastic commitment and also the divine protection which will make it possible for the monk to live it out. The articles of the habit, solemnly handed over to the monk during the rite with blessings and fervent pleas for God's mercy, mindfully worn with compunction and recollection, constitute for the monk another ongoing means of grace.

So, too, does monk's new mode of address. Among Eastern Christians of the Byzantine Rite, consecrated monks, regardless of clerical status, are traditionally addressed as "Father," and women who have made the same commitment as nuns are called "Mother." Although, we have been told, the Cistercians also maintained this ancient custom up until fairly recent times, current Western practice, reserves the title "Fa-

ther" for those who have been ordained priests. A few words of explanation will usually dispel any initial confusion this may cause, providing yet another opportunity for the insular Western Christian to learn something of the great variety of custom that exists within the Church.

The monk is called "Father" not for any achievement of power or authority, but because he stands in line of succession to the great Desert Fathers and Mothers of the Third and Fourth Centuries. This is hardly a source of pride; it is, rather, a humbling reminder of his own inadequacies in the face of his commitment. As these holy men and women were lights to the people of their own day and to each succeeding generation, so must he be. The responsibility may seem terrifying, but, with God's grace, it will be seen as a challenge and an encouragement for growth in spiritual life.



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In Peace and Repentance

The monk is a penitent at heart. He loves God intensely, and longs for union with Him. He is profoundly aware of the sin that stands in the way, and he longs to be cleansed of it. This desire is a prime motive for his embrace of monastic life, and it must remain a principal focus of his vocation. Guided by his spiritual fathers, he applies himself to the ascetic discipline of the monastery and, with sorrow for past failings, struggles to overcome his sinfulness.

It has been so from the beginning.

Eastern monasticism claims no particular founder other than the Lord Jesus Christ. Its various renunciations all derive from the Gospels and were practiced among the faithful to some extent from Apostolic times. The piety, asceticism, and poverty we tend to identify with the monastic life were the common heritage of the Church during its first centuries. Various members of the community exercised these charisms as they were given the grace; we may suppose that some exercised them all. Those who did so were not considered different or as having a special status; they were merely Christians who adhered strictly to the Gospel. Only in the Fourth Century, in the deserts of Egypt and Palestine, can we begin to distinguish monasticism as a separate and identifiable movement within the Church.

Christianity always seems to have had its monks and nuns. The description of the first Christian community in Jerusalem given in Acts 2:42-46 and 4:32-35, with only minor alterations, could easily fit many observant monasteries in our own day and, indeed, at just about any point in the Church's history. The centuries, of course, have brought much elaboration and development of monastic observance; yet it is the desert ascetics of Egypt and Palestine during the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Centuries who remain the privileged exemplars of the monastic spirit.

These Desert Fathers had no grand illusions concerning their way of life. They were simply following the Gospel. They took seriously its

command to repent. While others might be impressed with their heroic asceticism, their intense prayer, their evident holiness, the Fathers inevitably thought of themselves only as the worst of sinners. Their sorrow for their own sinfulness manifested itself physically in tears, and their spiritual advice to beginners, as recorded in their *Sayings*, was almost invariably: Weep for your sins!

A brother asked Abba Poemen what he should do about his sins. The old man said to him: He who wishes to purify his faults purifies them with tears, and he who wishes to acquire virtues acquires them with tears; for weeping is the way Scripture and our fathers give us when they say, "Weep!" Truly, there is no other way than this.

This extreme compunction was not seen as some preliminary to spiritual development, an initial purification to be passed through as one moved on to higher things. It was, rather, the essence of desert asceticism, the goal toward which the brothers were striving, and, for the fathers who practiced it assiduously, a means of holiness and spiritual gifts. Moreover, it was a life-long endeavor. Abba Arsenius, for instance, after fifty-five years of struggle in the desert, was still weeping for his sins on the day he died.

It was said of him that he had a hollow in his chest channeled out by the tears which fell from his eyes all his life as he sat at his manual work. When Abba Poemen learned that he was dead, he said weeping: Truly blessed are you, Abba Arsenius, for you wept for yourself in this world! He who does not weep here below will weep eternally hereafter; so it is impossible not to weep, either voluntarily or when compelled through suffering.

Although of foundational importance, weeping did not overshadow the other aspects of the desert life. The monks continued to work, recite their psalms and short prayers, and practice hospitality. Compunction remained their primary concern, however, the source of their strength for all the rest.

Abba Joseph of Panephrisis said: When brothers come, let us receive them and speak freely with

them. On the other hand, when we are alone we ought to weep, in order that we may persevere.

The Fathers were generally cheerful men, radiant and peaceful. Their tears, sighs, and groanings were not affectations meant for public display – the *Sayings* are full of instances of the Fathers apologizing for having inadvertently let such charisms be observed by others. Nor did their compunction rule out other forms of mystical prayer:

Abba Lot went to see Abba Joseph and said to him: Abba, as far as I can, I say my little office, I fast a little, I pray and meditate, I live in peace, and, as far as I can, I purify my thoughts. What else can I do? Then the old man stood up and stretched his hands toward heaven. His fingers became like ten lamps of fire, and he said to him: If you will, you can become all flame.

Such wonders are seen no longer. They probably never were commonplace; the *Lives* and the *Sayings* mention them infrequently. Tears also – although, even now, occasionally someone is gifted with them – seem largely to have dried up in our day. But, to the monks who stand in direct line from these desert giants, their example and teaching remain ever alive and life giving. The compunction that lay behind their tears is needed today more than ever.

Progress in the spiritual life is often described as proceeding from purification to prayer, contemplation, and, finally, to illumination or deification. These spiritual qualities each remain with us as we advance in the mystical life. Like the Desert Father, gazing upon the beauty of God and wrapped in Divine Light while reciting his Psalmody and weeping for his sins, the contemplative who may be granted glimpses of divine brightness will still need to pray with words, and he will feel even more deeply the compunction that marked his entrance upon spiritual life.

Compunction is sorrow for sin. It is not depression or a pathological sadness, nor is it a dwelling in detail on the sins of the past. Rather it is an honestly critical look at ourselves, a deep regret and repentance of past failings, and a sobering awareness of how far we still are from

perfection. It contains an element of fear, since we are very much aware that sin could still overtake us and work our ruin, but, above all, it is marked by a liberating holy joy. We know that sin is the only thing that can harm us, and sin can be overcome by repentance.

Human society has always militated against such single-minded self-awareness. The Fathers found it necessary to flee to the harshness of the desert to find a conducive atmosphere. The ascetic discipline of today's monasteries – even where it has not been watered down in the general softness of the times – is hard pressed to serve as well. Raising compunction in the heart of one reared in the midst of our self-centered, “feel good” society can be a challenge, indeed.

In monasteries of the Byzantine Rite, the daily Office, itself, is an ally. Most of its non-Scriptural texts – Psalms comprise about half of each service – were composed by monks of the first millennium. Many of these wondrously formative prayers, hymns, and chants derive ultimately from the monastery of St. Sabas near Bethlehem; those associated with Psalm 140 (141), the penitential Psalm of Vespers, seem in particular to breathe the sweet compunction of the desert.

We may thank God for the Byzantine sense of tradition and for its great respect for the inviolability of liturgy. Despite a thousand years of development, translation into many tongues, and its celebration in many places, the Divine Office has thus far escaped accommodation with worldly fashion and still retains the purifying spirit of the desert. It provides a witness against the rampant self-aggrandizement of our times and serves as a healthy balance to a Liturgy that can sometimes lead us to feel we have already arrived in Heaven.

Singing with the desert monks of a thousand years past, the stony arrogance of our modern hearts begins to soften toward humility and compunction. Their holy words draw us toward the desert and the life of peace and repentance for which we so earnestly pray.

Together in Harmony

The Fathers and the Liturgy often use musical imagery to illustrate the co-operation and unity that must mark Christ's Church. Council Fathers, having reached theological consensus, are said to sing a hymn in unison. A vast choir, harmonious despite the many different voices of its singers, is a powerful and moving image of the unity of mind and heart Christians have prized from the beginning (cf. Acts 4:32).

Christian monasteries in particular seek to replicate the beautiful simplicity of these first Christians. Like them, monks live together and hold their goods in common, they devote themselves to apostolic teaching and to prayer and the Eucharist (cf. Acts 2:42-47). Above all, they strive for that unity of intent, purpose, and understanding so aptly summed up as "harmony." For our own small monastery, the word is particularly appropriate; we are, in fact, a choir.

Prayer is the essence of monastic life. It is the purpose of the monk's withdrawal from the world and his motivation for living together with other like minded souls. Away from the world's many distractions, he is free to devote himself to contemplation, conversation with God deep within the recesses of his heart. At fixed hours he also stands to pray in common with his brothers; in our monastery the common prayer is almost entirely sung.

This prayer is liturgical – that is, a public work, undertaken on behalf of the people. It concerns the well-being of the whole world. Persistent litanies of petition for the needs of the Church, our nation, and the world, punctuate the Psalms and hymns of our Services. Singing the Lord's praises and begging His mercy on this world of ours, we know that this prayer is heard and that it is efficacious.

Again I tell you, if two of you join their voices on earth to pray for anything whatever, it shall be granted you by My Father in heaven.

(Mt. 18:19)

Liturgical prayer is the most important function of this little monastery. The four or five hours per day we normally spend in choir constitute our noblest endeavor, our greatest benefit to the world. They also represent our closest connection with one another and our intimacy with God.

Our music mostly consists of simple traditional melodies, quickly learned by rote and then wedded to a great variety of liturgical texts. The texts, themselves, are often profoundly theological, offering rare insights into God's truth. Singing them over the years helps us to internalize their content and make it strongly held belief rather than intellectual proposition. From right worship come theological understanding and

O You who have given us the grace to pray together in harmony and have promised to grant the requests of two or three who join their voices to call upon Your name: fulfill now the petitions of Your servants, in so far as is for good, granting us knowledge of Your truth in this life, and in the age to come – eternal life.

Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom,
Prayer of the Third Antiphon

knowledge of God.

The monastic choir is the bond of our life. Whatever our individual tasks and responsibilities, we all sing the Services; for some hours each day we are all gathered together in the temple, totally united in this holy work. The choir demands attentiveness, sensitivity, and great effort; the Services sometimes leave us drained and exhausted. Yet they also lift us up and restore the wholeness often fractured by the day's cares. As our voices meld in the sacred chants, we are drawn out of our petty isolation and into a splendid oneness of mind and heart. In this unity we know we are not alone:

Where two or three are gathered in My name, there I am in their midst.

(Mt. 18:20)

By the Labor of Their Hands

From the beginning, work has been integral to the monastic experience. The Lives and Sayings of the Desert Fathers are filled with references to the ropes, mats, and baskets woven by the hermits of the Egyptian desert. Pachomius, the first to organize a cenobitic community, quartered his monks according to their occupations, formed a large production center, and built a far flung trading network for his monasteries. His monks even had ships on the Nile to convey their agricultural produce and manufactured goods to market and to bring back what the monasteries needed.

From the vineyards of the French and German Benedictines, to the icon studios of the Studite Monks of Constantinople, to the sheep ranches of the English Cistercians, and down to the cheese, jam, fruitcake, and icon reproductions of present day American monasteries, commercial enterprise has been a constant in monastic life. How, one may wonder, can all this productive activity be reconciled with the monastic ideal of a life devoted to prayer? Is this not, in fact, defeating the purpose of monastic life?

A monk is a man of prayer. In leaving the world, he does not renounce his humanity, but, rather, seeks its purification and transfiguration. While living the angelic life of the monastery, he remains a man, and work is the common lot of mankind. The Book of Genesis (2:15) tells us that the first man was placed in a garden to cultivate and care for it; work was part of his original happiness, and it remains a great good, a natural blessing.

While he lives in separation from the world, the monk does not see himself as different from his fellow men. He does not feel that his life of prayer somehow exempts him from his responsibility to provide for himself. He is a man; if he

wishes to eat, he must work (cf. 2 Thes. 3:10). This is the natural order of things; to seek to live otherwise, would be a rebellion against God, a denial of the Creator's wisdom.

Because of sin work has become difficult and burdensome (Gen. 3: 17-19) for fallen mankind. The monk knows that he, too, is a sinner; his toil is as much a part of his ascetic discipline as his fasting. His work is one more avenue toward spiritual growth, purification, and transfiguration in Christ Jesus.

His work also demonstrates his solidarity with the poor. His labor is often of a menial sort, without glamour, and earning little praise. St. Benedict insists that his monks engage in manual labor. High profile jobs are foreign to the monastic endeavor. Without fanfare, and expecting no reward, the monk humbly addresses the task set before him, grateful for the many blessings of Divine Providence.

Moreover, since it is his duty to provide hospitality to all who come to his door and to help those in need, his work must garner a surplus over and above his own needs. The monk is called to help the poor, not by redistributing the fruit of other men's labor, but by sharing what has been gained by his own. His work must be diligent, not for his own enrichment, but for the benefit of others, be they his brother monks or the world's poor.

Thus it often happens that monasteries become financially successful. This is not as ironic as it may seem. The monk's renunciation of wealth and property is a personal commitment, a reliance upon the mercy of God and the love of his brothers. His community need not, indeed, should not, be destitute. To carry out its life and work, the monastery requires a certain degree of

They are truly monks
when they live
by the labor of their hands,
as did our Fathers
and the Apostles.

Rule of St. Benedict
Chapter 48



prosperity, and the Lord, in His mercy, provides. Often as not, the agency of His providence is the work of the monks themselves.

Work, therefore, is seldom lacking at a monastery. In a small community, such as our own, it can become overwhelming. Herein lies a problem: how balance the blessings of work with the commitment to a life of prayer.

For the Desert Fathers it was not much of a problem. Their weaving of mats and baskets was rote physical work; with practice it became automatic and left the mind free for contemplation or the recitation of the Psalms which they all had by heart. They met for services in common usually only once a week, and each kept his own schedule and routine. Some worked incessantly, others only enough to get by.

Cenobitic communities, with a fixed schedule of common prayer, are not so flexible and require wise guidance so that the proper balance may be maintained. Western communities often have different summer and winter schedules to allow for more work during busy

times. Eastern monasteries usually have just a few monks (sometimes only one) recite the daytime hours while the rest engage in the work at hand.

Neither strategy is totally satisfactory in a community as small as ours. Maintaining both the work and the liturgical prayer can sometimes seem nearly impossible. From time to time we have had to make adjustments.

Over the years we have taken various measures to reduce our workload at the Jampot, our bakery and shop, but we remain stretched pretty thin, and we burn a lot of midnight oil. Still, not everything gets done as promptly or efficiently as it should. Housework and correspondence get notoriously short shrift, and any unusual demand on our time is liable to raise major problems elsewhere.

We know this is a common situation for small, young communities. Like many trials of youth it will lessen with time. We patiently wait for that day. Meanwhile, we trust that the lessons learned will strengthen us for the other labors that must lie ahead.



Building the Kingdom



From the very beginning of our monastic life at Jacob's Falls, we have seen as our special charism and apostolic work the building up of God's Kingdom through the arts.

We firmly believe that human artistry is a divine gift, given by God that we might all come to know Him better. In creating beauty, we exercise and manifest an integral part of our nature. We were created in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26-27). God is the ultimate Creator; through our own creative abilities we can express our likeness to Him, render Him thanks and praise for His many blessings, and proclaim His love for the whole world.

Beauty has the power to touch the soul directly, to evoke in the heart feelings of joy, exaltation, or sadness. It can elevate the mind to spiritual matters and make the soul more receptive of things divine. Through their beauty, the works of our hands may move others closer to God.

Here we enter the realm of art. True art is communication; it carries messages of the Lord's power and glory and of His limitless love. These messages, conveyed by physical beauty, are perceived for the most part in a subliminal or spiritual manner. They bring joy to the heart and prevent the world from falling into despair. Thus the arts may serve as a sort of bridge between the material and spiritual realms. This has tremendous implications for the life of the Church and, indeed, of the whole world.

These thoughts served as a major motivation for undertaking monastic life in this place, and they continue to inform our vision. As heirs of the rich and ancient tradition of Byzantine Christianity, music and visual art are integral to our worship and its environment. The challenges of singing the Services day in and day out and of building and beautifying our church are on-going, but the struggle continues to bear fruit. God is merciful, and, despite our multiple

inadequacies, He provides for improvement and growth in many – sometimes unexpected – ways.

A dozen years ago we received a generous gift designated for the performing arts. The donation allowed for the location and restoration of a piano and for the construction of a modest recital room to house it. The resulting new wing of the monastery, to the north of our original building, was completed in the spring of 2001; soon after, we took delivery of the piano. Originally constructed in Boston by Mason & Hamlin in 1910, the concert grand piano was lovingly rebuilt by the James Reeder Company of Lansing some ninety years later. It has proven resonant in timbre, and its elegant, well balanced tone has thrilled the artists who have played upon it. Its presence provides continued impetus to our recital series: *Music at the Monastery*.

For the present the series continues to be occasional in nature, with events scheduled as the time and finances of the monastery allow.



With much rearranging of furniture, we can presently accommodate about forty guests. We are beginning to develop plans for a larger, better arranged recital hall. Actual construction will depend on the retirement of our existing debt and the availability of funding for the new project. This may still be sometime in the future, but it is good to be prepared; the Lord's bounty has surprised us more than once in the past.

Meanwhile, we continue to schedule occasional artistic events, to exercise and improve the various talents the Lord has bestowed upon us, and to sing His praises each day with all our hearts. May our life in this holy monastery at all times and in every way redound to His holy glory.



Still Here!

We have often noted that our work at the Jampot is a ministry as well as a livelihood. Over the counter conversations do sometimes provide occasion for imparting solace or some modest spiritual direction. More often, however, they offer opportunity for clarifying misunderstandings:

“What order are you?” we are frequently asked. “Are you Jesuits, Franciscans, or what?”

“‘Order’ is the wrong term,” we reply – hopefully with a certain degree of patience. “We are monks, Byzantine (Ukrainian) Catholic monks. We are Eastern Rite Catholics, and in the East monasteries are not grouped together in large religious orders. Rather they are independent of one another and each subject to the authority of their local Bishop.”

“I see. So how long will *you* be here?”

“God willing, ‘til the day I die. There’s nowhere else I’d rather be. And, as a monk, I’m permanently committed to the monastery of my profession. With the grace of continued perseverance, I’ll be here until my brothers lay me in the grave.”

The monk’s perseverance in the face of his many trials is summed up in his vow of stability. For better or worse, he solemnly promises to abide within his monastery until death and there, with the loving help and support of his brothers, to live the life to which the Lord has called him and, thus, to work out his salvation.

Monastic stability is not something negative; it is not merely the acceptance of confinement, as if the monastery were no more than a prison; still less, does it result from fear of engaging the world. Rather, it is a commitment to remain faithful to one’s calling, to sink roots, and to grow with the brethren in the love of God. It is a covenant of sharing and openness with one another, of mutual help and forgiveness, as each one journeys toward his ultimate union with Christ Jesus.

It is also unconditional. The monk embraces his monastery as it is, with its unique strengths and weaknesses, its beauties and flaws. He joins a particular group of men in a specific place with a given living situation. He does not speculate about who may come in later or how conditions may change. He binds himself to the monastery of the present and promises to remain faithful to whatever the Lord may make of it in the future. Here, he sinks his roots.

His rootedness allows him to draw nourishment and strength from his environment, human, natural, and spiritual. His surroundings shape and form him, and he, for good or ill, plays his part in forming them. As he lives his stability, he grows increasingly one with his monastery and is filled with the Lord’s peace. He can see the Hand of God in the events and circumstances that have brought him home.

Such commitment is not taken lightly. It binds the monastery as well as the monk. The monastery embraces him for life with all his imperfections and assumes permanent responsibility for all his physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. Long discernment is needed on both sides. Normally a man would live four years as postulant and novice in our monastery, growing in openness, understanding, spirit, and commitment, before we would receive his vows and consecrate him as a monk.

Monastic stability stands as a sign of contradiction and a witness against the uprootedness of our most unstable times. It brings profound peace and freedom from anxiety to those who embrace it, and it provides a beacon of hope for those caught up in the darkness and turmoil of our constantly changing world.

Over the years, we have encouraged a number of men to think of us as a refuge from the futility of worldly life. To those who are free to embrace that refuge, and to those who treasure our prayer and witness, it must remain a consolation and a joy that we are – and will be – still here.