

The Role and Significance of Orthodox Monasticism Today

Homily in Montana

When the persecutions of the Church of Christ came to an end, a new kind of martyrdom emerged — a bloodless one, the “martyrdom of conscience”: monasticism. Many sons and daughters of the now free Church were no longer content to serve God within the world; they desired to embody in their lives the apostolic call to bring *every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ* (2 Cor 10:5), striving thus for perfection — hence monasticism has often been called a “martyrdom of conscience.”

This perfection of Christian life is found in the purity of heart where the Holy Spirit makes His dwelling. Those who attained it did not undertake such an ascetic struggle for selfish reasons. Having become chosen vessels of God, they fulfil Christ’s two greatest commandments: love for God and love for neighbor (Mk 12:30–31; Mt 22:40). Because their love is perfect, they no longer serve Him in the flesh but in the Spirit.

It should further be emphasized: this service — in those who, through monastic life, reached the highest spiritual stature — was something without which the Church could not have endured the trials and temptations of the centuries. They became *the lamp of the Church’s body* and her *clear eye* (Lk 11:34), always able to see things rightly; as lights of discernment, they offered answers to the hardest questions, preserving the Church from straying off the saving path of the Gospel.

For that reason, it is of great importance that the Orthodox Church — always mindful of the Savior’s words, *You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned?* (Mt 5:13) — should preserve and nurture monasticism and assist it in its growth, so that monasticism, in turn, may respond to this care with its best spiritual fruits.

Guided by this understanding, we have joyfully accepted the invitation to come to this distant land of Montana — distant for us Athonites — for we came to understand that here too there are souls who sincerely desire to dedicate their lives to the Lord, serving Him in the monastic calling. Therefore, I would take the liberty, on behalf of all of us gathered here in the house of the Holy Apostle Peter, to offer thanksgiving to the Triune God, who — through the prayers of the Venerable Fathers whose example we seek to follow — has brought us all together, that we might encourage and strengthen one another through the sharing of spiritual experience.

Every Christian is called to be an ascetic. In the early centuries of Christianity, when the awareness of the necessity of spiritual struggle was alive in every member of the Church, monasticism was met with deep understanding. Those who, in those times, took upon themselves the yoke of monastic service did not, in essence, make a drastic change in their way of life. But as this ascetic spirit among Christians began to fade, monastics too found it harder to reach their ideals. And now, when the spirit of consumer society has led all humanity — including us, Orthodox Christians — to devote our greatest concern to pleasing ourselves and our passions, there are fewer and fewer who can truly understand, or even sense, the essence of monastic life. The awareness of its necessity has likewise become weak. Yet on the other hand, the Church of Christ — and indeed the whole world — deprived of the living examples of spiritual struggle and of the fulfillment of the Gospel commandments, now more than ever, stands in need of monasticism: a life whose ideal is portrayed in the Paschal hymn, *Yesterday I was buried with You, O Christ; today I arise with You in Your Resurrection.*¹

¹ St John of Damascus, *Canon of the Holy and Great Sunday of Pascha*, Ode 3.

The Serbian people have always cherished an awareness of the sacred value of monastic life. For their holiest offspring and spiritual father, Saint Sava — who from his youth served God in the monastic calling and thus became great before Him — has remained their model and guide, leading them through the centuries toward the Heavenly Kingdom by his teaching. At the same time, monks and nuns of Serbian descent, as well as all those who have labored in monastic struggle within the lands of the Serbian people, have, through their God-dedicated lives, drawn down divine grace upon the much-suffering Serbian nation and upon her Church throughout the centuries. We should also note that the Serbian people have always preserved a deep sense of the significance of Mount Athos, looking with love and great reverence upon that peninsula dedicated to the Most Holy Theotokos, for it was there that Saint Sava began his monastic labors.

It is also important to note that, for all the reasons mentioned above, today's monasticism faces a particular danger. Namely, precisely because dedication to God in the monastic calling has become rare compared to the more pious times in the life of the Church, we, today's monks and nuns, are often surrounded by excessive praise from other believers. And thus, even though, in truth, "we have no true monastic deeds and differ from the laity only by our garments," as the ever-memorable Elder Tadej of Vitovnica once — humbly yet honestly — described the monastics of our time, we nevertheless begin to acquire a false sense of greater worth before God and of being somehow chosen above the other members of the Church community.

This happens because we measure our life and our spiritual struggle — if we have any — not against the lives and monastic rules of the holy men and women, but against the spirit of the age, which has led many Christians to order their lives according to the standards of the fallen world. For this reason, we suppose that it is enough to receive the monastic tonsure and that salvation is thereby already assured. We may never say this openly to others, nor even admit it to ourselves, yet that spirit dwells within us; and so we are in danger of being startled at the end when we hear this judgment about ourselves: *I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth.* (Rev. 3:15–16)

Therefore, it is our duty to remind all of you who intend to take up the cross of monastic life that the only way to avoid such snares of our cunning enemies is through **spiritual guidance**. Without genuine spiritual direction, there is great danger that the great sacrifice involved in leaving the world and receiving the monastic tonsure — together with all our efforts on this path — may bring us more spiritual harm than benefit. Saint Basil the Great, in his *Longer Rules*, already wrote of the necessity for monks to reveal their thoughts to the abbot of the monastery or to another person entrusted with this responsibility. In answer to Question 26, which asks whether one should reveal everything to the superior — even the secrets of the heart — Saint Basil writes: "If he wishes to make progress truly worth speaking of and to have his life confirmed in a manner of living that accords with the commandments of our Lord Jesus Christ, he should conceal no movement of his soul, nor utter any unexamined word; rather, he should lay bare the secrets of his heart to those among the brethren entrusted with compassionate care for the weak, so that what is praiseworthy may be confirmed and what is harmful may receive the necessary healing. And by such mutual exercise, through gradual progress, perfection will be attained."² The saint commands us "not to conceal even a single movement of the soul," and this is best accomplished through the revelation of all our thoughts. The one to whom we disclose these thoughts — our spiritual guide — has the duty to discern which of them are "worthy of praise," that is, spiritually good, and to strengthen them within us; while those that are "not good," arising as the fruit of the passions dwelling in us,

² St Basil the Great, *The Longer Rules*, Q. 26.

he must subject to spiritual healing. Saint Basil does not fail to reveal to us why this is necessary: so that, “through gradual progress, we may attain perfection.” Perfection — the very goal for which we leave the world behind and take upon ourselves the spiritual struggle of monastic life.

“No, a monk is not a useless man, but he can be the most useful of all people to his fellow men.” These words were written by Saint Bishop Nikolaj Velimirovic. Interpreting the Gospel passage read at the Divine Liturgy on the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, he explains that one of the reasons the Lord often withdrew into solitude was to justify and to inspire the eremitic and monastic life, which was yet to be born in His Church. He showed, says Saint Nikolai, that a good and needed person can never be hidden, proving in action the truth of His own words: *A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden.* (Matt. 5:14)³

Saint Bishop Nikolaj points out the connection between the Savior’s frequent withdrawal into the wilderness and monastic life: “The history of the Church has shown, thousands of times, that never has a great hermit, man of prayer, or miracle-worker been able to remain hidden from the people. Many ask, without understanding: What is a monk doing in the desert? Would it not be better for him to live among the people and thus be of use to them? But how can an unlit candle give light? The monk takes his soul, like an unlit candle, into the desert and into solitude, to kindle it by fasting, prayer, contemplation, and labor. If he succeeds in kindling it, his light will be seen by the whole world, and the world will come to him and will find him — even if he hides himself in the sandy deserts, the impenetrable mountains, or the inaccessible caves.”⁴ And finally, Saint Nikolaj concludes with the already quoted words: **“No, a monk is not a useless man, but he can be the most useful of all people to his fellow men.”**

Inspired by these words, we wish to understand in what way a monk can truly be of help to others. The answer is this: by preaching the Gospel through the example of a virtuous life. Saint Paisios of Mount Athos also spoke of this, pointing out that monks do not help people by preaching the Gospel from the pulpit, but by **living** the Gospel — and thus the Gospel is proclaimed in the most powerful way: through example, which is what the world, especially today’s world, thirsts for. If we truly fulfill this calling in practice, then we will also have the boldness to exclaim together with the Apostle: *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.* (2 Cor. 1:3–4) These words of the holy Apostle Paul remind us that the monastic life is an apostolic life. For those who, through monastic service, have fulfilled the commandments of the Gospel and acquired the evangelical virtues — and to whom the *God of all comfort* sends His help in *all our tribulation* — have indeed been found worthy of apostolic grace, and are now able to *comfort those who are in any trouble*. Just as the apostolic ministry continues in the Church to this very day through monasticism, so the words that the Lord once addressed to His disciples can also be applied to those who serve Him in the monastic calling: *You are the light of the world.* (Matt. 5:14) Thus the Lord spoke to the apostles as He sent them out to preach, adding: *Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house.* (Matt. 5:15) Commenting on these words from the Gospel of Matthew, Blessed Theophylact explains that the Savior wished to teach His disciples that, just as He Himself — Christ — had kindled in them the inextinguishable light of grace, so they must zealously strive to let others be illumined by the light of their own lives.⁵ It is also worth noting that Father Georges Florovsky, in

³ See: Свети Николај Охридски и жички, *Омилије на недељна и празнична Јеванђеља, Недеља осма по Духовдану*, 187. [St. Nikolaj Velimirovic, *Homilies on the Gospel Readings for Sundays and Feasts, Eighth Sunday after Pentecost*].

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Блажени Теофилакт Охридски, *Тумачење Светог Еванђеља од Матеја* (Манастир Високи Дечани: 1996), 62. [Blessed Theophylact of Ohrid, *The Explanation of the Holy Gospel According to Matthew*]

his work *The Eastern Fathers of the Fourth Century*, suggested that Saint Basil the Great sought to present monastic life as a “social ideal” — a counterbalance to the divisions and disintegration he saw around him, even within Christian society — and that through this ideal he hoped to “restore the unity of heart and mind” and “the bonds of the world,” at least within the chosen few.⁶

Finally, having contemplated the greatness and exaltedness of monasticism, and at the same time being aware of our own weakness and limitations, it is fitting that we recall the life of Saint Pachomius the Great — particularly the passage in which it is said that he was granted a vision revealing how, after his repose, the brethren would fall into great spiritual snares. He saw a deep and dark abyss, and within it a great multitude of monks struggling in torment, trying in vain to climb out. From this he understood that, in the latter times, monks would become negligent, slothful, darkened and prone to fall, having only the outward monastic appearance. Realizing this, the Saint wept bitterly and said to God:

“Lord Almighty, if this is to be so, why have You then permitted the existence of coenobitic life and of monasteries at all? Remember Your covenant, by which You promised to preserve, until the end of the age, those who serve You.”

Then the Lord appeared to the Saint in the form of a young man, wearing a crown of thorns upon His head, and said:

“Do not be afraid, Pachomius, but be courageous; for your spiritual offspring shall not cease until the end of the age. And many of those monks who will come after you, being saved with My help from that deep and dark abyss, shall prove greater than the virtuous monks of your own time. Others will be saved through sufferings and afflictions, and they shall be made equal to the great saints. Truly I say to you: they shall receive the same salvation as the monks of today, who live in perfection and without reproach.”

Having said this, the Lord ascended into heaven in great glory. And Saint Pachomius fell to the ground, worshipped the Lord, and glorified Him with his lips and his heart for that most wondrous vision.⁷

Let us also glorify our Lord, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, in communion with the venerable fathers Pachomius the Great and Prohor of Pčinja — who has gathered us all today in this ancient sanctuary — and with all the venerable fathers and mothers who have found favor with God in their monastic life.

At Hilandar Monastery, Mount Athos

October 2025 A.D.

Archimandrite Metodije

⁶ Протојереј Георгије Флоровски, *Источни оци IV века* (Манастир Хиландар, 1997), 67. [Georges Florovsky, *The Eastern Fathers of the Fourth Century*]

⁷ Архим. Др Јустин Поповић, *Житија светих за месец мај* (Манастир Св. Ћелије код Ваљева, 1996), 405-406. [Archimandrite Dr. Justin Popovich, *The Lives of the Saints for the Month of May*]