

## The Basics of Orthodoxy Class 102

*St. Gregory of Nyssa Orthodox Church, Kingston, Ontario, Canada*

### Topic 11: Monasticism as a Path to Heaven

*(The Faith, Chapter 17)*

1 Corinth. 7:32-34, 1 Corinth. 7:7, Matthew 19:10-12, 1 Timothy 5:9-16, Matthew 19:21

Hebrews 12:1, Matthew 5:30, Matthew 4:4, Luke 22:42

*The Faith*, page 239: “**Monks and nuns are the scientists of the spiritual world, using prayer, renunciation, fasting, and obedience as their tools in exploring the depths of the human soul.”**

“The family is a Church in miniature. Within its circle of love the husband, wife, and children work out their salvation together. While the vast majority of Christians are called to live out their lives in Holy Matrimony, some are called to walk a different path.”

“St. Paul explains that the responsibilities of marriage and the cares of life in the world can distract our attention away from our relationship with Christ:

‘But I would have you without carefulness. He that is unmarried careth for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please the Lord. But he that is married careth for the things that are of the world, how he may please his wife. There is difference also between a wife and a virgin. The unmarried woman careth for the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in spirit: but she that is married careth for the things of the world, how she may please her husband’  
(1 Corinthians 7:32-34).

*The Faith*, page 240: “St. Paul is not saying that marriage is bad. Indeed, the Church **excommunicates** those who say that it is evil (Council of Gangra). It is obvious, however, that married life entails responsibilities that the celibate life does not. This is why St. Paul writes:

‘For I would that all men were even as I myself (that is, unmarried). But every man hath **his proper gift of God, one after this manner, and another after that**’  
(1 Corinthians 7:7).

“Notice that St. Paul speaks of the **celibate life as a gift of God**. It is not a life that we are able to live on our own power. Our Lord taught the same thing. After He explained to His Disciples that a man is to have only one wife for his lifetime, the Disciples replied:

‘If the case of the man be so with his wife, it is not good to marry.’ But He said unto them, “**All men cannot receive this saying, save they to whom it is given.** For there are some eunuchs, which were so born from their mothers womb: and there are some eunuchs, which were made eunuchs of men: and there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven’s sake. **He that is able to receive it, let him receive it**” (Matthew 19:10-12).

“The celibate life, therefore, is for those who are **able to receive it.**”

“Celibates living in the world, however, must deal with many of the same temptations and distractions as married couples. For this reason the Church offers the possibility of consecrating oneself solely to the task of one’s salvation. **Monasticism is the consecration of the celibate life.** It is a life devoted exclusively to repentance, prayer, and service to God.”

*The Faith*, page 241: “**Monasticism** as we know it today developed in the **fourth century**, but the idea of consecrating one’s life solely to the work of God is much older. The **prophets of the Old Testament**, particularly **St. John the Baptist**, are the prototypical monks. In the early Church, **widows and virgins** constituted a distinct order within the community. To be accepted to the order of widows, a woman had to be of a certain age and spiritual maturity. Loss of a husband alone did not qualify one for this order. (See **1 Timothy 5:9-16**)

“Although St. Anthony of Egypt is often called the ‘Father of Monasticism,’ there were people living the monastic life already when he heeded the Lord’s words, ‘If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow Me’ (**Matthew 19:21**). He left his younger sister in the care of “respected and trusted Virgins,” and he himself learned from men living the solitary life near his village.

“Although not the first monk, St. Anthony’s life **inspired many to follow** in his steps. By the end of the fourth century, the Egyptian desert had become populated with those who had **renounced** the world in order **to seek God.**”

“Those who, like St. Anthony, accept this call of the Lord become the spiritual **vanguard of the Church.** They remain **awake** during the **watches of the night**, **praying and keeping vigil** while we sleep.”

*The Faith*, page 242: “They chart the unexplored territory of the human spirit, plumbing the depths of their own sinfulness through their **profound, lifelong repentance.** They become **living examples of life in Christ**—vessels of **humility** from which the pride of this world has been banished through **obedience, fasting, and toil.**”

“The Church’s **daily cycle of prayer** is the primary work of the monastic. Monks and nuns spend **several hours a day** in the temple chanting the Daily Office. Because of our responsibilities in the world, we cannot spend our days in

prayer, so monks and nuns spend their days praying for us.

“In addition to praying the Daily Office, monks also **spend hours in personal prayer**, focusing in particular on **the Prayer of Jesus**. It is in the solitude of his cell that the monk explores the inner regions of his soul, using the Jesus Prayer as his light.

“The Jesus Prayer is, above all, a prayer of repentance: “**Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, the sinner.**” Repentance is the life of the monk, as Archimandrite George says:

‘**Repentance is the daily struggle** of the monk. His asceticism looks toward this one purpose: that he repent the more deeply and so is more pleasing to God. Repentance is the **monk’s “science,”** He does not repent just because he sinned at some time in the past. Rather, he feels intensely and every day that he cannot reply perfectly to God’s love. **He wants to offer himself completely to God**, to be in perfect harmony with His commandments, and not to embitter Him with the slightest opposition to His will (*The Eros of Repentance*, pp. 16-17).

*The Faith*, page 243: “Notice that Fr. George calls repentance the “science” of the monk. Indeed, monks are the scientists and explorers of the spiritual life. They traverse the inner world of the human spirit, confronting the depths of their own sinfulness as well as the wellsprings of God’s infinite grace.

In addition to prayer, the monk has other scientific instruments at his disposal: **renunciation, fasting, and obedience**.

The monk **renounces** life in the world, giving up all claims to property, inheritance, and even family ties. He does this in order to ‘lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us’ (**Hebrews 12:1**). The monk takes the admonition of our Lord quite literally:

‘And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off , and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell’ (**Matthew 5:30**).

In the same way, the monk gives himself over to strenuous **fasting**, not in order to destroy the body, but to save it.

‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God’ (**Matthew 4:4**).

The monk strives to subdue his dependence on the bread of this world in order to lay hold of the Bread of heaven.

**Obedience** is absolutely central to the monastic life. If **prayer** is the **work** of the monk, and **repentance** his **science**, then **obedience** is his **tutor** and infallible guide.

*The Faith*, page 244: “**Only through obedience** to his spiritual father is the **monk’s self-will cut off**. Only in this way does he grow into the image of His Lord, Who, being God of all, nevertheless prayed, ‘not My will, but Thine, be done’ (**Luke 22:42**).

“It must be stressed that the **difference between the life of a monk or nun and that of a layman is one of degree, not kind**. All Christians must have as their **goal** in life the **salvation of their souls**. All Christians are obliged to pray, fast, and obey the canons of the Church and their spiritual father. **Monks**, however, **renounce** life in the world to **devote themselves exclusively** to the pursuit of salvation, **praying for hours** each day. They **fast more strictly** and more often than laymen, never eating meat. Furthermore, they are bound to a **much deeper level of obedience** to their spiritual master.

It is because of **their total commitment to life in Christ** that monastics live life “on the edge.” They experience the life of the Church, both fasts and feasts, in all of its fullness, and they also draw to themselves the attentions of the Evil One and his demons. They are truly the scientists and explorers of the spirit.

“As with all sciences, however, some practitioners become more adept than others. The most advanced are called hesychasts. *Hesychia* means “stillness.” A **hesychast** is one who has **achieved inner stillness**—one who has **found** the inner place of the heart and **dwells** there with his God.

Those who excel in virtue become our teachers in the spiritual life. Their experiences—their experiments in the realm of the soul—are recorded in their...

*The Faith*, page 245: “...biographies and spiritual counsels, as recorded by their disciples. There are thousands upon thousands of pages of such spiritual nourishment available to us today, among them *The Philokalia* and *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*.

“While these books are a great spiritual treasure, the **greatest treasure is a living relationship** with such a spiritual scientist. It is within such a relationship that the true significance of monasticism becomes apparent. It is when one meets a true monk that one realizes what human life is supposed to be like. Archimandrite Vasileios describes such a man:

An old monk, a true ascetic comes to our monastery from time to time to ask for a little help. With what he receives, he feeds himself and also helps others, older than himself... This old man, although he is more than seventy-five, does not expect anyone to respect him. He thinks of himself as a dog. He bows to everyone and asks their blessing, not only to the monks but also to the novices and to the pilgrims who come to us. **But he is full of such inexpressible grace that a joyful sense of**

**celebration runs through the monastery every time he comes.** All of us, monks and pilgrims, gather round him to hear words of grace which come from his lips, to be encouraged by the joy that his face reflects, without his ever suspecting it. It is like the Father of the desert who asked God that he might not receive any glory on this earth, and whose **face was so radiant that no one could look directly at him** (*Hymn of Entry*, pp. 123-124).”

*The Faith*, page 246

#### THE FATHERS SPEAK

“He who has **renounced** such things as marriage, possessions and other worldly pursuits is outwardly a monk, but may *not* yet be a monk inwardly. **Only he** who has **renounced the impassioned thoughts of his inner self**, which is the intellect, **is a true monk**. It is easy to be a monk in one’s outer self if one wants to be; but no small struggle is required to be a monk in one’s inner self.”

“Who in this generation is completely free from impassioned thoughts and has been granted uninterrupted, pure, and spiritual prayer? Yet this is **the mark of the inner monk**.”

(St. Hesychios the Priest, from “On Watchfulness and Holiness,” *The Philokalia*, vol. 1)

“The **Apostles** received this way of life from Christ and made it their own, **renouncing the world in response to His call**, disregarding fatherland, relatives and possessions. At once they adopted a harsh and strenuous way of life, facing every kind of adversity, afflicted, tormented, harassed, naked, lacking even necessities; and finally they met death boldly, imitating their Teacher faithfully in all things. Thus through their actions they left behind a true image of the highest way of life.”

(St. Neilos the Ascetic, from “Ascetic Discourse,” *The Philokalia*, vol. 1)