

On Monasticism

Monasticism is the heart and soul of Christ's Body, that is, the Church. It is a fundamental part of the foundation of the Christian Church. Today there is no Orthodox Church without monastics.

Definition. According to St. Basil the Great, a monastic is defined as a good Christian. St. John Climacus, the eminent Orthodox theologian, in his "Ladder of Divine Ascent", writes: "Monasticism is an angelic order and state achieved in an earthly and soiled body. A monk is one who follows only the commands of God, always and everywhere... A monk is one who keeps his body in chastity, his mouth pure and his mind illuminated."¹

The **aim of monasticism** is the same as for all of mankind. The ultimate aim is theosis. Metropolitan Ilarion (Ohienko) explains this perfectly in his book "Theosis of Man – the aim of human life". A Christian must be most closely connected with God, and this is the purpose of his life and his future. Theosis for man is real; it is the transfiguration of the soul under the influence of divine power; in reality it is our uniting with the Divine, it is a gradual spiritualization of a spiritual being, and at the highest level it involves a complete and real spiritual unity of the soul with God².

Another aim of monasticism is to strengthen and build the Church, which is Christ's Body on earth. It is the duty of every Christian to care about their "home church", that is their fam-

ily. The monastic's family is the Church, and their duty is to care for the Church with all their strength: by prayer, through the work of their hands and their intellect.

Monastic Rules. When a person joins a monastic community, i. e. a monastery, they embrace three basic obediences in their service to God and the Church: chastity, non-acquisitiveness, obedience.

Metropolitan Ilarion (Ohienko) expresses very well the rule of **chastity**: "It is easier for a unmarried person to save oneself and others because family binds a man with numerous cares of life. The spiritual value of chastity is explained clearly by Apostle Paul: 'An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs – how he can please the Lord. But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world – how he can please his wife' (1 Cor. 7:32-33). Chastity purifies the mind from evil thoughts and makes man equal to the angels."³

The rule of **non-acquisitiveness** means not to gather goods for themselves, not to look for the vanities of this world, and not to seek for money. "As waves never leave the sea, so anger and cares never leave the money-loving man"⁴, says St. John Climacus. Accepting this discipline allows a monastic freedom to sincerely work for God and the Church. The third rule, **obedience** to the monastic community and the Church, is intended to kill pride and selfishness in a person. No greater love for God and Men can be shown by a person than to deny himself and be prepared to lay down his life for his friends (John 15:13) Obedience means to willingly submit to God through the spiritual father/mother.

Prayer. Monasticism is considered to be a pillar and foundation of the Church because the first task of a monastic is to pray. St. Silouan of Athos, speaking about monastic prayer, states: "A monk prays for the whole world... Lay people pray less, however, a monk prays always. Due to monastics, prayer never stops, and it is useful for the whole world because the world is maintained by prayer..."⁵. St. Theodore the Studite in his Rule of monastic life divides the 24-hour day into three equal parts: 8 hours for common prayer, 8 hours for common work and 8 hours for personal time.

Prayer is not perfect without fasting (Mt. 17:21). Both have one aim which is attain the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit is seen in His gifts, such as love, hope, faith, gift of knowledge and others (1 Cor. 12).

Work is very important for monastics. Metropolitan Ilarion (Ohienko) says: "Work, especially physical, brings to the spirit victory over the body... A monk works with prayer and joy, because work is the foundation of every life"⁶.

Monasticism provides the Church with **good personnel**, who are devoted to Church, who in the name of the Church seek to place themselves before God's face by means of prayer and good works. Monastics seek to live sincerely for God, not to seek their own interests or satisfy their own ego. During their lives in the monastery, often with many challenges and temptations, monastics strive to achieve these things. Indifference to the self is a central goal for a monastic.

Charitable activity for monks is obligatory as prescribed by the Orthodox Monastic Rule. Almsgiving means spiritual and material sup-

port. Monasteries distribute the donations of money, foods, clothes they receive from benefactors to those who are in need: orphans, widows, less fortunate and the infirm. Traditionally monastics take care of orphans. Today many of the monastic communities in Ukraine raise these poor children. Likewise, many Orthodox monasteries care for the elderly. Ministering to the sick and infirm is part of monastic activity.

The contribution of monasticism to **education and science** is enormous both historically as well as in the current times. Metropolitan Ilarion (Ohienko) remarks: “Being the Church of high education, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church had brought education to its faithful very early by founding schools ...and monasteries were the only ones to maintain all the schools ...”⁷ Many European nations are owing the development of the language, education and sciences to monastic communities. Educated Ukrainian monastics founded and led schools, both primary and universities, they wrote books: secular, scientific and ecclesiastical.

As well, **culture, arts, artistic handicrafts** flourished in the monasteries. The monasteries developed icon writing, gilding, carving, sewing, embroidery and other arts. Monasteries in every time and in every continent became **centers of the national and spiritual culture**.

Monasteries are oases of spirituality. A Christian overwhelmed by the problems of modern life, can find in the monastery a spiritual retreat, where they can gain new strength in order to face the challenges of life and continue their own journey of Theosis-Union with God.

As evident from the above, monastics give all their time to the Church. Their whole life is focused on the needs of the Church. According to Metropolitan Ilarion (Ohienko) “monasteries are filled with ardent servants of God who have given the whole of their life for service to the Faith....”⁸

-Sister Bohdanna

¹Saint John Climacus. The Ladder of Divine Ascent.- Boston, Massachusetts: Holy Transfiguration Monastery.- 1991, p. 4.

²Митрополит Іларіон. Обоження людини – ціль людського життя: Богословська студія.- Вінніпег.- 1954, с.5, 57.

³Іван Огієнко (Митрополит Іларіон). Українське Монашество.- Київ: Наша культура і наука, 2002.- р. 52

⁴Saint John Climacus. The Ladder of Divine Ascent.- Boston: Holy Transfiguration Monastery.- 1991, p. 133.

⁵Старець Силуан. Життя і поучення.- Мінськ: Православна община.- 1991, с. 366-367.

⁶Іван Огієнко (Митрополит Іларіон). Українське Монашество.- Київ: Наша культура і наука, 2002.- р. 52.

⁷Там само, с. 31-33.

⁸Там само, с. 10

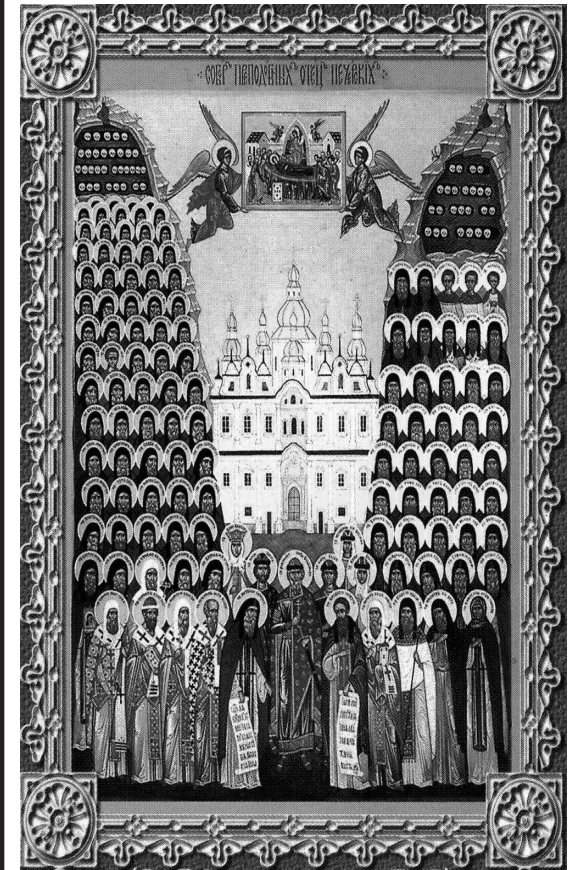
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Monasticism - heart and soul of the church



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