

Why be a monk?

What is a monk? One who strives to love God with all his heart, all his soul and all his mind and all his strength, and to love his neighbor as himself.

Monasticism is the heart of the Christian Church. It is radical discipleship to Christ, taking the Lord at His word in the Scriptures, and striving to live by it in an integral way.

Monasticism is not about being all dressed up. It is not about doing all the church services. It is not about being involved in church politics, or even knowing about them. Monasticism is not about religion—all the practices, beliefs, rituals and traditions. It is not about ascetic acts. It is not about a solitary life of pursuing one's own religious path.

Monasticism is about living the Gospel without compromise. It is about living in Christ by the Holy Spirit, and growing by grace to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. Monasticism is about life lived in obedience to Christ, in self-denial and bearing the cross of whatever suffering God sends us to help us work out our salvation. Monasticism is about working out our salvation in a community of like-minded men, by learning to love our brother "who is our life" (St Silouan).

A monastery is a single body, a sacramental community of the Church, like a marriage. It is a community in which each is present to help the other work out his salvation. We are not saved alone. We are saved as the Body of Christ. The Body is constituted by communion in love: in one mind and heart, with one will and one life. To build that unity in Christ by the Spirit, in one will and vision, is the common task of the brotherhood. It is the means by which we transcend our isolated individualism, our fallenness, and attain to true personhood. Our true personhood embraces all in the one mystical Person of Christ. This is the real ascetic task: to overcome our individual isolation, our egoism, our self-centeredness and self-love, and all our agendas and concepts of ourself and even of God. Ultimately, it is to embrace the whole world, the whole creation, and each person, in love.

Who can become a monk? Anyone. BUT, that does not mean that everyone is called to it. It is a calling, a charism, a gift. There are no impediments to becoming a monk. But not every community is able to receive everyone.

It is important to remember that monastic life is about striving for Christ. A monastery is not a psychiatric hospital, not a poorhouse, retirement home, group home or halfway house. To use it as such is to abuse it. To try to use it as a means to escape the responsibilities of life, or in order to be taken care of, will only lead to disappointment. This does not mean that the monastery does not take care of the ill, elderly or those in need. Those are important ministries of a monastic community. But to join the monastery to try to escape the necessities of living, working and relating in the world is to come to it for the wrong reason. The only reason to join the monastery is for the love of Christ, and the desire to follow Him.

Preparation for Monastic Life

St Ignatij Brianchaninov writes that God-pleasing life in the world is the most important preparation for monastic life. This means to fulfill all one's responsibilities,

and live according to the commandments, working to support oneself, and being merciful to the needy. And, of course, one must go to church, receive the sacraments, and live a life of prayer and fasting.

For the ancient Fathers, coming to baptism and entering monasticism went hand in hand. They renounced a sinful way of life and the world at the same time, and embraced the spiritual life in a radical way. This often happens in our own days as well. One should have a good foundation in the life of the Church before coming to the monastery. But, some come to the monastery directly out of the world. Each is called differently. What is important is a solid faith, a radical commitment to Christ, and a sense that the world holds nothing for oneself, but that our life consists entirely in the love of Christ.

To join the monastery, on a practical level, one should have all one's debts paid off. Bankruptcy, for the sake of convenience or laziness, is not an option. It may be best to live close to the monastery while paying off one's debts, and do whatever it is that will pay them off as quickly as possible, and honorably.

We must battle to overcome consumerism and worldliness while living in the world. The Lord calls us to be "in the world, but not of the world." If one has children, or ill or elderly parents, one cannot simply abandon them. Their welfare must be seen to. This is an essential Christian duty, which as the Lord tells us, cannot be abolished. It also means that one might have to put off monastic commitment until such issues are resolved. Those issues have to be dealt with before one enters the community.

One cannot "retire" to a monastery. A monastery is a place of intense struggle, work and constant, demanding effort. Monks often work harder than those who are in the world, with hours per day of services on top of the work load. St Benedict's motto was "Prayer and work." We must strive to earn our own living by the work of our own hands. Everyone has to work, to contribute, to share the burden. The difference is that in the monastery, work is sanctified, and work sanctifies us, as our contribution to the life of the whole body. It is a means of serving one another, and of overcoming our selfishness.

Neither can one escape his problems or "issues" in the monastery. In contrast to living in the world, where there are endless distractions to keep us from confronting our problems, emotional and psychological issues, there are no distractions in the monastery. In the monastery, there are no television, movies, radio, newspapers, novels or friends, parties, alcohol or narcotics. There is only the silence, the services, our quiet work, and our prayers. And in the normal course of spiritual development, all our issues come up and hit us squarely in the face.

When to enter the monastic life

The virtually universal consensus of monastic spiritual fathers and mothers is that the younger one enters the monastic life, the better. It becomes harder and harder as one gets older.

In the past, and still in the "old countries," it was not uncommon for children to enter the monastic life, either with their families or by themselves. Several prominent figures in the Orthodox churches in America became monastics at 11 or 12 years of age: Bp Jovan, Mo Benedicta, Fr Roman. Others entered in their late teens or early twenties.

The best time is generally from 18-25, because one's identity has not yet crystalized, and one is looking for one's place in life. From 25-29, one's identity has

begun to solidify, and one gets into patterns that will be with him for his whole life. The early twenties are a time of great idealism and energy, while the older one gets, that becomes more and more moderated by experience. After 30, and especially after 35, it becomes more and more difficult. Some spiritual fathers recommend that people in their late 40's and beyond simply remain in the world, in their own homes, and keep to the rule of life given by their spiritual father, a kind of "white monasticism." Contemporary Roman Catholic monasteries seldom admit people over 40 or 45.

The old Orthodox tradition of retiring to a monastery is a wonderful thing, if one has resources that one can contribute so that he will not be an undue burden on the community. Still, it will require an enormous adjustment for an older person, who has either been on their own or had a family, to adjust to community life.

The Biggest Obstacle

The biggest issue for people joining a monastery is to give up their own willfulness and autonomous independence, and to accept monastic obedience. This is especially true in our culture of individualism. For youths entering, they have hardly experienced individual autonomy in the world, and so it remains a temptation to wonder what it would have been like. For older men, however, the ingrained habits of thinking, acting and deciding present strong obstacles, as from their experience they think they know best. This makes obedience even harder.

The spiritual battle with the passions is not so much about dealing with the natural impulses of the body and mind as it is about the habitual ways of dealing with those impulses that have become virtually unconscious. This is a key aspect of monastic asceticism: to deny oneself the gratification of one's willfulness and habitual ways of being. This is not only in relation to the flesh, but especially in regards to the will and "how things are done." To overcome the passions means to overcome the long established habits of a lifetime. Youths might think they cannot change. But the battle for someone older is much more intense.

Monastic Life as the Way of Repentance

Monasticism is a life of repentance: turning away from a sinful way of life, from the pursuit of vanity and of the world, and to turn towards God and to pursue His will. This repentance is the essence and core of the monastic calling. It is not simply feeling sorry about one's sins; rather, you must turn away from them, deny yourself, and follow Christ. It is the way of the Cross.

Repentance is about the radical transformation of our whole life, our vision of life, our consciousness, as well as our actions and way of life. It means not only to leave behind the sinful actions of our previous life, but the very attachment to the motivations that led us to that kind of life. Monasticism is a sacrament: we are transformed by it. Part of it is healing, being made whole, actualizing our authentic personhood. It is having our lives sanctified and deified, actualizing the sacramentality of our Christian vocation. To be authentically a Christian means that "It is not I who live, but Christ lives in me." Thus our repentance means to let the old man in us die, and be crucified to the world, so that the new man may be born and live in Christ by the Holy Spirit. Repentance is thus not simply turning away from the world and sin, but a positive turning towards a completely new life in God.

Most men that come to the monastery have come to the conclusion that all that is in the world is vanity: “the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, and the pride of life.” And that to pursue these things—money, sex and power—leads nowhere, and does not give us any fulfillment. The momentary gratifications that these things give are ultimately passing and unfulfilling. There has to be something more to life! Yet when we realize our attachment to these agendas, on many levels, we realize how great the task of repentance is. Repentance is about detachment.

The Call to Monastic Life

There are three ways men are called to the monastic life, according to the Fathers of the Church. The first is a direct call from God. The second, from other people. The third, through circumstances.

The first is the strongest. Somehow, God reveals His will to us, that He wants us to become a monk. Sometimes this is through a mystical experience, sometimes through a deep insight into our self. On the other hand, because this comes from God directly, and may be a great surprise to us, we often rebel. St Symeon the New Theologian had a profound experience as a youth, and then went back to the world and worldliness, and only later repented. St Augustine has a famous saying: Lord, grant me chastity, but not yet! St Silouan fell back into worldly passions after his calling, and then repented.

A direct calling from God to monastic life may be part of a direct calling to spiritual awareness. The grace of God penetrates our being and opens our spiritual eyes, and instills faith within our souls. He opens the reality of Himself to us, and in so doing, also opens our awareness of our own fallenness. This spiritual awakening may coincide with a calling experience, or may come later on. It is a fundamental shift in our consciousness, illumined by grace, and leading us to repentance and the transformation of our whole life. Not all mystical experiences are from God, and they must be tried and tested. First, they must be submitted to one’s spiritual father, for his discernment.

The second way, a call coming through other people, is where it becomes plain to others, especially our spiritual guides, that we should embrace the monastic life. Of course, it should be plain to us as well. When we seek guidance, such as that of a great elder, his words may resonate in our souls, and we will know that what he spoke is the truth. We may or may not like it, but it remains the truth. Then we try it out. And it should be plain to us then that it is the way God wants us to go.

The third way, by circumstances, is most nebulous. Sometimes we can find ourselves at a monastery, and find that we like the way of life, and simply begin to fit in. Or we meet the spiritual father, and want to be close to him. Sometimes it comes through a realization of the vanity of our life in the world. There are many ways this can happen.

What is clear though is that when we know we have a calling from God or that it is clear through others and resonates in our souls, we go as soon as possible. It is not something to be put on hold, to “wait until I bury my father.” This is a calling from the Lord and should be pursued at once. The more intense it is, the more intently we should pursue the call. This does not mean that we should hurt others in doing so. But we must not let them hold us back: “He who loves father or mother...son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me...” The initial stages of life in the monastery are where we try our vocation, begin our detachment from the world and from our fallen self, and our own

will. It is in the furnace of obedience in which we come to know whether we are called to this life or not. This knowledge, the realization of God's call to us, is the fruit of much prayer. We must seek God and His will, surrender ourselves to His will completely. To pray "Lord Jesus Christ, Thy will be done!" is something very helpful for our search. But when it becomes clear to us, we must do it!

Choosing a Monastery: Monastic Discipleship

How do you choose a monastery? The best way is that you choose, or rather, recognize your spiritual father or mother, and he or she will recognize you as his/her spiritual child. If you choose a monastery because the abbot is famous, or the monastery rich and comfortable, or in a favorable location, then your motives are wrong, selfish. "I can only go to a spiritual father who is worthy to receive my repentance" is a statement that comes from outrageous pride and self-opinion. The spiritual father does not need to be some kind of clairvoyant elder. Rather, he is someone to whom you can open your heart. There is often a mutual recognition, that "this is my father," and "this is my son." Or, at least, that this is a person with whom I want to work out my salvation.

Monasticism is discipleship. The discipler, the spiritual father or mother, is the one to whom you will promise obedience, as a means of being obedient to Christ. It is a sacramental relationship: obedience given to the spiritual father for Christ's sake becomes obedience to Christ. The spiritual father will not give you something immoral or illegal—it would be your duty to disobey such a command. Being obedient means cutting off our own will. It is training. But it is also a means of grace, because we are obedient to Christ through our obedience to the spiritual father. This is itself a means of grace, a synergy or cooperation with God, and accomplished by the power of His energy. We strive to harmonize our will with God's will, by cutting off our self-will in obedience. Then it becomes all grace, God's activity within us. But the more we resist, rebel and protest, the more self-willed and independent we are, the more we reject the grace of God.

Obedience is not about subjugation. It is not about depriving the disciple of his will, or much less surrender of one's personhood. These are abuses. Rather, obedience is willing submission in love. The military model of obedience is totally alien to monastic obedience. True monastic obedience, however, requires substantial maturity. But that too is part of the process of growth.

The relationship between a spiritual father and son is a relationship of love and respect, mutual in every dimension. It becomes the context in which we authentically develop our personhood, and transcend our ego-centrism. Submission to a spiritual father means to enter into a mutual striving for salvation together (1Peter 5:5). It is a relationship of the most profound intimacy and openness. You come to know each other profoundly. And yet, the relationship of a spiritual father and son is also a participation in Christ's own sonship to the Father. It is a relationship that is sacramental, full of grace. That grace does not depend on the charismatic gifts of the spiritual father, his maturity or clairvoyance. Of course he should be someone blessed by the Church to have such a ministry, and likely will be a priest. If the relationship is undertaken in good faith, on both parts, it becomes that sacramental bond in Christ by the Spirit.

It is important to respect and have faith in your spiritual father. But know for certain that your spiritual elder is a sinful man with passions and shortcomings, like

yourself. If you have the idea that he is sinless and infallible, you are only setting yourself up for a huge fall. And if you judge your spiritual father for his inevitable failings, you are also setting yourself up for a fall from your own pride and arrogance. We must remember that this relationship, because it is the very means of working out our salvation, will be tried by fire. Our faith in our spiritual father will be tried by enormous temptations, by his mistakes and shortcomings, and by our own brokenness, rebelliousness and arrogance. But what is important is to persevere through the temptations, and not allow oneself to judge him. It is said that there are very, very few great elders in the world, but what is even more rare is the true disciple. We must remember that our judgment exposes our own hypocrisy, more than anyone else's.

The parable of the Prodigal Son is one of the Lord's most vivid illustrations, and used extensively for the monastic life. How profoundly we betray our Father, going off and living prodigally, wasting his riches on harlotry and riotous living. Coming to our self, finally, we repent and return to the Father. How the Father has waited for the return of his beloved son, no matter how much the son's insensitivity, words and actions have hurt the father. The Father does not assign us a place with the servants, but restores to us our birthright—now a gift of grace. So also does our spiritual father wait for us to repent, to return, so that we may receive the gift of his love.

Make haste to open to me Thy fatherly embrace, for as the prodigal I have wasted my life. In the unfailing wealth of Thy mercy, O Savior, reject not my heart in its poverty. For with compunction I cry to Thee, O Lord: Father, I have sinned against heaven and before Thee. (Troparion at Monastic Tonsure)

You have found your spiritual father when knowing you, you realize that he loves you unconditionally. His is the monastery which you should join.

The Koinobion: Life in Common

The ideal of the Christian life is a life in common with others. Whether it is the community of marriage and a family, or the monastic life, the common life is the norm and the foundation for all Christians. Even solitaries and hermits, if they are real, have undoubtedly lived the life of a community and discipleship. Their solitude and separation are only the fruit of their overwhelming love and solidarity with the rest of the brethren. Solitaries almost always live in relationship to a coenobitic community.

Life in a koinobion—I use the Greek word because it also conveys the sense of communion, *koinonia*—is the means for us to live out our discipleship, cut off our will, learn to love our neighbor, and attain authentic personhood. Discipleship and obedience to the spiritual father, working out relationships among the brothers and with visitors, work, and the discipline of the monastic program are the means by which we are trained to overcome ourselves. The old cliché is very appropriate: the community is like a stream that takes rough rocks and by pounding them together against one another, produces smooth stones.

A monastery is a kind of family: the spiritual father and his children. It is patriarchy at its best—when it functions right. Often in our culture young men have had very dysfunctional relationships with their fathers, if any at all. The monastery becomes the context to work out a new way of relating, with love and respect, in obedience and cooperation. This requires learning how to cut off our wills, our passions, and to give and receive love. It takes autonomous, immature individuals and makes them into

persons in a communion of life and being. The goal is to grow into one mind and one heart, one spirit and one will, in communion with the Father as the Son and the Holy Spirit share a unity of will and life with Him. Thus the unity of the community is a sacramental icon of the Holy Trinity: one nature, many persons, united in one will and life. This is also growth into maturity, “to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” To enter into this communion, to learn to bear the burden of the other, takes a lot of practice. The process of personal transformation, and spiritual growth, takes years. It requires tremendous patience, love and constant repentance.

Another way of saying this is that our goal is to become authentically our self, who God made us to be, to actualize our potential as a human being. We can only do this in communion with God and others, because our personhood means to be authentically open to love the other, and receive love back. Personhood means communion. How we love our brother is the criterion of how we love God. It has been said that the criterion of how we love God is the degree to which we love the one we despise the most: that is how much we love God. St Silouan said, “Our brother is our life.” This is the essence of monastic community. It is the process of learning to love. We cannot learn to love God until we learn to love our neighbor. We have to be psychologically and emotionally mature before we can begin to consider the real spiritual task.

In our immaturity, we relate to one another on the level of our egos: who and what we want people to think we are, images of what we think we should be, or should not be. Sometimes these are over-inflated opinions of our self, sometimes they are fantasies of what a monk should be like, or deep self-hatred and self-contempt. These all isolate us from others, from authentic communion in love, and from our true selves, from accepting who God made us to be. They prevent us from giving and receiving love. The only way out of this is to grow.

The relationship to the spiritual father is the way to work out authentic self-acceptance. The spiritual father loves the spiritual son unconditionally, and that love is the foundation for the son to learn how to love the other, to accept himself, and to look at himself in naked honesty and love himself in a healthy way. Constant confession, opening the heart to the spiritual father, and exposing the most shameful and inmost thoughts and inclinations, is the way to this deep cleansing of the heart. The father must give his son both the encouragement and the rebukes that help him see himself. But this is always in a spirit of unconditional love and acceptance, even when the passions are raging and the son is in a state of rebellion and stubbornness. So the spiritual father is called to be patient, no matter how hurtful the son can be. All the rage, anger, rebelliousness and hatred that are concealed in the heart get projected onto the spiritual father. The passions of envy and jealousy, abandonment anxiety, pride, and anything else surface in the first few years in the monastery, if things are working right.

Obedience is one of the most important things to expose the passions. Obedience demands the cutting off of the will; and our passions are in what we will. Obedience also demands cooperation with the other brothers. We easily cooperate when we want to do something; when we don't, that is the key point in the confrontation with our will. And if we have underlying passions, such as envy and jealousy, pride and arrogance—Why did he get to do that? The Abbot loves him more than me... Why should I have to do that?... or I should have gotten to do that... etc.—so the real battleground of purification is obedience.

Another fundamental value of living in community is working out relationships with one another. Men in our culture are taught to be autonomous, individualistic: that is, to be competitive, to be closed to one another, and ultimately, to be self-isolated from one another in fear and insecurity. This is to be imprisoned in adolescence. What we strive for is a healthy inter-dependence, mutual support and openness in a spirit of love and respect. This is another description of emotional and psychological maturity. Any kind of unhealthy dependence has to be healed so that healthy interdependence can arise. Unhealthy relationships will destroy a community, and leave the immature co-dependent in a state of despair. Our culture is dysfunctional and produces very few solid, mature men.

Love above all things

The Lord Jesus Christ told us that men will know that we are his disciples by how we love one another. Our love is not in words alone, but in deeds. It is not an emotion: it is rather an attitude towards others.

As the fathers at Vatopaidi Monastery on Mount Athos emphasize, there is no thing more important in the monastic life than that the brothers love one another. All the rituals and services, ascetic exercises, external forms and traditions mean nothing—and in fact condemn us—if we don't have love for one another.

In marriage, love is exclusive: the love of the spouses for one another excludes any other particular loves. One learns to grow in love for others by the loving relationship with one's spouse and children, and from that foundation, learn to unconditionally love and accept others. There remains an exclusivity, however, that must never be breached. Otherwise, the marriage itself will be impaired.

In monasticism, one learns to love in a non-exclusive way, in an inclusive way that excludes particular individual loves. Not that we will not have normal human preferences and closer rapport with some than others. But there is no exclusivity. The greater one matures spiritually, the less blockages to love of the other there are left in his soul. Turning away from self-love, and growing beyond individual attachments to the heights of all-inclusive unconditional love of the other is the real vocation of the monk. In this are included all the elements of the spiritual struggle and life: the purification of the soul from selfishness and attachments; illumination by grace—which is nothing other than the energy and love of God; and the deification of our whole being—to be permeated entirely with the divine grace and presence, in complete synergy with God's activity, and transformed by His energy.

From Psychological Religion to Authentic Spirituality

How do we grow from a psychological religious life to true spirituality? How do we attain authentic personhood? What is the meaning of noetic vision in this quest?

In the beginning of our spiritual journey, when we are spiritually immature, our entire religious outlook is ego-centered, emotional and rational. The deeper level of awareness, the noetic consciousness, has not yet been fully opened. We don't know our true self, and we live in function of rules and external observance. Our prayer is words in

the mind, and not yet descended to the heart. We love God from duty, and our neighbor from obedience. Yet, it all remains self-centered, ego-centered. We want to be “right,” and we zealously defend our positions, whether doctrinal, ritual or otherwise. In short, we are our egos, defined by our passions. We are far from being authentic persons, caught up in our isolated individualism.

As we grow, and gain more and more control over our passions, and our soul is purified, grace illumines our spiritual (noetic) consciousness. We become more aware of God’s presence, more aware of the other. We move away from our self-centeredness, to the restoration of the focus of our attention on God. As this happens, our own personal “I” expands, and encompasses others, so that we cannot conceive of ourselves in isolation from God and our brothers; they are who “I” am, and “I” includes them. It is the bond of authentic spiritual love, powered by grace. The more we grow in this noetic consciousness, the more our love embraces all those around us. We pray from the heart for them, and for the whole world. We are purified by grace, so that we can authentically love in a purely unselfish way. This is the essence of what it means to be a Christian: to authentically love.

By truly loving God and our neighbor—for our love for our neighbor is the criterion of our love of God (cf. 1 John)—we are purified, illumined, deified. We are healed from our fallenness, from our ego/self centeredness, from the tyranny of our rational and emotional consciousness. The passions come under our control, subordinated to the love of the Other. We become purified of all that focuses us in ourself, and becomes a barrier to love.

“Our brother is our life” as St Silouan said. This is what authentic monasticism is: the love of our neighbor. The more purified our love is, the more we actualize our own personhood, and the more our personal “I” expands, to include the whole monastic brotherhood, the town, the region, the country, the Church, the whole world. The saints are those whose “I” includes the whole Church, and their prayer is for all as their true self. Having attained to true personhood, to authentic spiritual maturity, the Christian realizes in his life what Fr Sophrony calls “the hypostatic principle,” existence like that of Christ, in Christ, for Christ, as Christ. Our deification is realized in becoming perfected in love, embracing the whole creation, as Christ did, and being grounded in His divine Person. It is a state of true synergy with God: our love in co-operation with His love, which is His energy, His grace, His life.

The koinobitic ideal means the realization of this inclusive love on the part of each member of the community, each according to their level of maturity and ability.

The Way of Spiritual Growth

Monastic life is the way of spiritual growth. Through monastic discipline, we come to realize our spiritual immaturity, sinfulness, and brokenness, and that the only way of growth is to focus entirely on Christ. If we think we are righteous, if we think we are zealous, and if we think we are spiritual, we are most likely possessed by enormous pride and vainglory, and we are in delusion. The way of spiritual growth is to realize our passions, and the delusions that they cause, and begin to live soberly, humbly and in reality. We must begin to realize how self-willed we are, and turn away from it in repentance, and learn obedience. We realize how we use, abuse and objectify people, by

our egocentric immaturity, and learn to love, and thus grow beyond our individualistic egocentrism into authentic personhood. We do this through entering into and living in community, in relationship with the spiritual father and the brothers of the monastery.

Spiritual growth can only occur on the foundation of psychological maturity. Sometimes, having joined a monastery, previously unknown psychological issues surface, especially maturity issues. This is normal. These issues are epidemic in our society, which fosters narcissism and emotional immaturity in men. Frequently men remain psychologically or emotionally adolescents through their 30's. This presents challenges both to the young monk as well as the spiritual father. But, the process of coming to psychological maturity, formation of identity, and the beginning of control over major issues, such as anger and rebelliousness, are the key to the foundations of authentic spiritual life.

Psychological maturity means basic control over the passions. This does not mean that we must have achieved dispassion before entering the monastery. Rather, it means that we are not constantly thrown into inner chaos by every event or comment that does not go our way. It means that we have basic emotional stability. It also means that we have begun to recognize our egocentrism, and turn outwards, so that we can have authentic relationships with others. Part of this process of maturation and growth into stability can happen during novitiate, but there needs to be a foundation already laid before coming to the monastery.

The passions operate on the level of the ego: gluttony, lust, avarice, anger, envy, despondency, vainglory and pride are among the chief passions. The passions are good and natural parts of our nature that have been corrupted and turned towards self-gratification and defenses for our egos. When we feel threatened, our passions kick in to protect our self-image, or to console our bruised ego. When we feel inferior, our pride and vainglory kick in to assure us that we really are superior, judging and condemning the other. When we feel hurt or depressed, we distract ourselves with indulgence in food, alcohol, sex or shopping. When we are offended, we get angry and rage at the offender. Or, we can turn these feelings in against ourselves: pride into self-hatred, anger into self-contempt, vainglory into self-pity, etc. The passions distract us from confronting the real issues that are making us feel fearful, threatened, inferior or offended: our own deep insecurities and self-concept. They can also arise from issues long buried that are yet unconscious. They create a delusion, a little reality all of its own to fortify the ego, and are the motivations of self-will. The passions prevent us from dealing with reality, and from being authentically who we are. They distract us from communion with God and with others, and distort our personhood.

The battle with the passions is the real content of the monastic struggle. It is not so much battle against the passions themselves, as it is to overcome our ego, which is itself the creation of our passions. It is to strive for the virtues: love, peace, honesty, chastity, continence, humility and so forth; not as ends in themselves, but as fruits of the Spirit Who transforms and transfigures our lives. This battle is the cross of self-denial. It is fought within the arena of obedience. It is precisely this battle that brings one to spiritual maturity. The real goal, however, is not simply to become dispassionate. Rather, it is to come to constant conscious awareness of God, from which comes authentic maturity, which is to become authentically oneself. We must overcome our ego, our

objective self-conceptualizations, so that we can actualize our true self, and authentically love the other.

Self-denial means to say no to oneself. We constantly indulge ourselves, our whims, senses, thoughts and fantasies. An ascetic approach to life is a life lived by denying ourselves not only the outward gratification of our desires, but even the thoughts which go through our mind. The core of ascetic self-denial is the confrontation with thoughts, *logismoi* in Greek, because all passions, sins and temptations start with thoughts. To learn to cut off thoughts, and not react to them, is half the battle. The other half is to focus our spiritual awareness on the Presence of God.

Carnal, Psychic, Spiritual

St Paul uses three concepts to illustrate the levels of human life: the carnal man, the natural (“*psychic*” in Greek), and the spiritual man. A man pursues the gratification of his physical passions, and acts carnally; or he is governed by his sense perceptions and his rational mind, not having awareness of spiritual reality; this is the “*psychic*” or natural man. This level of existence is egocentric, and immature. The soul, the *psyche*, processes all the sensations, emotions, thoughts and perceptions that come through the senses. We can live almost entirely on this level, without spiritual awareness or with the illusion of spiritual awareness, and often do so in the world. Even religion itself can often be on a “*psychic*” level, with a preoccupation with rules, forms, rituals and organization. It is the level of objective knowledge, rational understanding, and emotional reactions.

Life for the natural man is governed by the ego, our self-objectification, which we create according to how we perceive ourselves and want ourselves to be regarded by others. We create this through our experiences, our passions and sins, how we are treated by others, and the expectations of how we will function in relation to the world and to others. The ego—the false self—contains all our desires as well as all our hurts. It shapes how we function—or don’t function—in the world. It is false, in that it is not our deep self, but it is not necessarily evil. But it is definitely mortal. It is simply the product of our fallenness, our isolation from God through the clouding of the awareness of our deep self, our *nous*.

“Natural” or *psychic* life is egocentric, because our awareness is completely focused on what we sense, how these ideas or sensations make us feel, what emotions are evoked, what we know and understand about things. Even relationships with others are in terms of how they make me feel, rather than about the other person. The “natural” level of awareness is the very essence of individualism, the fallen state of the human person. The ego shapes our will, our actions, our very consciousness, and keeps every aspect of our life in relation to itself. This is a vicious circle that keeps us trapped in a delusion of our own creation, and clouds our ability to see God, to truly know others, and to know ourselves. Our will becomes the expression of our ego, and seeks only that which will gratify the ego’s perception of itself. This is, of course, very fragile, and reality often shatters our illusions. Often we have to bottom out, in terms of inability to deal with the situations of life solely on the basis of our rational understanding. We come to realize life has another far more profound dimension to it.

Spiritual life begins with the enlightenment or awakening of our heart—the deep self, the *nous*, the spiritual core of our being. This can be a long process, or occur in a

single moment. It can occur early in life, long before a person has become a monk; or it can happen later, after much spiritual battle. Each person is different. But what happens is that grace enters our life and cuts through the egocentric world of our own creation, and awakens us in a new way, on a new level of consciousness. The deeper we go into this new level of awareness of God and ourselves, the more limited and superficial our old life appears to be. Spiritual consciousness, noetic awareness, is the very core of our deep self. This, however, is not the end, but just the beginning of our life in Christ.

Psychological Health Issues

It takes a great deal of psychological health and maturity to live in a monastic community. We have to confront ourselves, and the reality is usually very ugly. Childhood issues, maturity issues, relational issues all come to the surface. And they can easily overwhelm us, if we do not deal with them appropriately. That is through frequent frank confession of thoughts, and absolute openness with the spiritual father. And it may be that we need therapy, in order to deal with the problems that arise. If we have had an abusive childhood, of any kind; if we have suffered trauma; if we have lived riotously, all the memories will flood our consciousness. Every image we have ever seen, everything we have ever felt, all the anger, hatred, bitterness, resentment and other emotional baggage hit us almost out of nowhere. This is actually a great blessing, so that we can deal with it. But we cannot run away from it.

People with mental illness or personality disorders find it very, very difficult to lead the monastic life, and the monastic community finds it very, very difficult to bear their illness. Because those who are psychologically healthy have a tough time bearing all their own internal battles, those who are psychologically impaired are at an even greater disadvantage, because all the same battles come up. Those who need to be taken care of, because they are not able to function independently in society, are not good candidates for the monastery. They will be led to frustration, depression, and even deeper self-hatred for their inability to cope with the spiritual, relational and psychological demands of living in community. And they would lead the community into similar passions.

Problems such as bi-polar disorder, schizophrenia, borderline personality disorder, and other such issues should make one question what our real motives are for joining the monastery. If the disorder is treatable by medication, and the person can function normally, the monastery is not out of the question. But if they are not treatable so that a person can function normally, the monastery should be out of the question, unless that particular community has as its ministry to care for those with such problems.

We know this not because we have no temptations during this time, but because we see through the temptations that the monastery is the context in which I can truly become myself.

A holistic integrated life
Prayer, Fasting, Self-denial: the Way of the Cross
Confession, Revelation of Thoughts,
Constant communion of the Holy Mysteries
The common life: the koionbion
Love of one another, unity of mind and heart

The Monastic Vows and Gospel Virtues: Poverty, Chastity, Obedience and Stability

The monastic vows are virtues established by the Gospel, and are the context in which we work out our salvation. They are the way in which we emulate the life of Jesus, and conform ourselves to His way of life.

Jesus was the first monk, along with His Mother, St James his “brother,” the Apostles John, Paul and multitudes of others, though monasticism was not institutionally organized yet. We see in Jesus poverty, where “he had no place to lay his head;” chastity, a life of celibacy and becoming “a eunuch for the sake of the Kingdom of heaven;” obedience, the perfect obedience of the Son of God who was “obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross;” and stability, as He persevered even to the Cross, praying “nonetheless, not my will, but Thy will be done.” St Paul tells us, in Philippians, “Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus...” Our life is an emulation of Jesus’ life, as far as possible.

“All that is in the world is the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, and the pride of life” St John tells us in 1John 2: . These virtues of poverty, chastity and obedience remedy the passions of worldliness. When we pursue money, sex and power as the meaning of our life, then our life is in function of the “world,” in the ascetic and Gospel sense of the term. When we pursue the corresponding opposite virtues, poverty, chastity and obedience, we deny the world by denying ourselves the gratification of these passions. By denying ourselves the gratification of our passions, we embrace the way of the Cross.

These virtues exist on many different levels, depending on our level of maturity. We can be outwardly without possessions, but if we are still greedy, we will not be “poor in spirit.” If we are outwardly celibate, but engage in fornication in our thoughts, we are hypocritical, and our external virtue will be gravely in danger. If we are compliant, but grumble and complain, our obedience is only superficial. The deeper levels of these virtues, to which we are called as monks, are detachment from all things, purity of heart in relation to all people and profound personal integrity, and intuitive discernment of the will of God and the cutting off of our selfish willfulness.

Vatopaidi, Agion Oros, 2004

Do not resent, do not react, inner stillness.

These basic precepts of the spiritual life were conveyed to me by Bishop Kallistos (Samaras) of Zelon, who finished his life as Bishop of Denver. These principles represent a concise summary of

Monastic Spirituality

We are an American monastery in the 21st Century, in Northern California. We are informed by the Russian and Athonite traditions, but we cannot be either Russian or Athonite, because we are neither. We are Americans, trying to figure out what it means to be Orthodox Christians in this time and place. We synthesize from the many different aspects of Orthodox and monastic tradition that have manifested and nurtured the same vision and experience over the centuries, but we cannot be a slave to any external forms. It is a grave mistake to think that “if it looks right, it is right.”

Our spiritual life as Orthodox monks in 21st Century Northern California means that we have to confront all the various cultural and religious trends and ideas that spring up around us. On one hand, it means being a bastion of traditional spiritual and religious life, standing for the ancient Apostolic vision and tradition of doctrine, morality, and liturgical and spiritual practice. On the other hand, it also means to confront head on the neo-pagan religions, old paganisms, syncretisms, the pain the Christian churches have caused people that turn them away from Christ, and discern how to live and preach the Gospel. In other words, we have to be all things to all people so that we might by all means save some.

The essence of monastic spirituality is to enter into the love of God and of our neighbor—in other words, to incarnate the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Everything in the monastic life is focused around this: the services, the sacramental life, the life in community, the common work, spiritual direction, reading and studies, even our industries. Monastic spirituality is fully integrated, and is meant to integrate all of life around the Gospel, and by the Gospel. Growth to spiritual maturity means to transcend our isolated individual autonomy and enter into the living communion which is the Living Christ, head and body.

Our lives in the world are compartmentalized, with very little integration. Work is one thing, family another, church another and recreation another. Then we have our priorities, by which we decide what the order of precedence and importance is. But there is very little integration: our church life does not inform our work or recreation; our family life, if there is a real family life, may or may not be influenced by the Church.

In the monastery, the life is a single whole. Not only do we live, work, worship and study together, but we also are welded into one body, in a communion of love. We are called to bear one another's burdens, be patient, gentle, kind, longsuffering, and forgiving to one another. And in so doing, we not only build the community, but we grow ourselves. It is a long process to enter into an authentic communion of persons, taking years. How we treat one another has direct bearing on how close and integral the life of our community will be, how we will pray together, and how we work together. Community life is very demanding, like a marriage—only with many partners! It exposes our selfishness, our pettiness and passions, our agendas and arrogance, pride and vainglory. It makes us come to terms with ourselves. It is a context in which we work out how to love and be loved, and to elevate that love to a participation in divine Love.

The Father have taught us that we are not saved alone. The only thing we do alone is sin, fall, and go to hell. We are saved together, as a single body, the Body of Christ. Our communion here—not only eucharistic participation, but living bond of

love—is a participation in the Kingdom of God. The monastic community is an icon of that Body, a small Church. It is a communion of persons, united by one Spirit.

When we sin, we isolate ourselves from God and from one another, from that living unity in Christ. God does not withdraw His grace and His love: rather, we turn away from it, reject it, try to hide—as did Adam and Eve in the garden. The spiritual task is to open ourselves to accept that gift of love and grace, and be transformed by it.

There is always a tension between the corporate life of the community, and the personal life of each member. There is a dynamic of entering in and withdrawing, going deeper and fleeing, participation and hiding. The core of the corporate life of the community is the celebration and participation in the Holy Mysteries, especially the Holy Eucharist. There is always a corporate, communal dimension to our participation, in addition to the personal dimension of our own preparation and entrance into the mystery. The personal dimension, how we each uniquely enter in and contribute to the whole, our personal spiritual life, is the key to this dynamic of sin and repentance, growth in spiritual maturity and regression into rebelliousness, the dark nights of the senses, soul and spirit, and our experience of prayer. Every aspect affects every other aspect, both on the personal as well as the corporate level. How I pray affects how I participate in the liturgy, and either contribute or disrupt the experience of communion and corporate ascent to the Kingdom. My moods, dispositions, sins and transgressions all directly impact how I treat my brothers.

The process of personal spiritual life in monastic context is always shared. We support, rebuke, correct, encourage, build up and scandalize each other regularly.