

Monasticism

By Fr. John Hopko

Each year on May 15, Orthodox Christians commemorate the memory of Saint Pachomius the Great, the founder of cenobitic monasticism. Cenobitic is an English word that has its roots in a Greek compound word that means “life in common.” So, cenobitic monasticism is, in fact, the kind of monastic life with which we are most familiar today—life lived by monks or nuns, in common, together in a monastery. For most of us, that is about as much as we know about the life of monks and nuns—that they are religious people who live in communal life together in a monastery. So, the question is raised, what is day-to-day life like in a monastic community?

Who are the monastics? They are Orthodox Christian people who have decided to fully and formally commit themselves to a way of life that leaves behind worldly pursuits and concentrates on spiritual work. In a monastery at any given time you have living there a variety of people ranging from “seekers,” through “novices”, to the “clothed” and “professed”, and on to the “elders.”

Seekers are those who have come to live in the monastery with the idea that they might have a calling to live in a monastery as a monk or nun. But, they have made no permanent commitment and they are not yet clothed in monastic clothes (the “habit”). Novices are those who truly believe they have a calling to live in the monastery, and who are blessed to wear a portion of the monastic habit, usually the basic black robe and belt and a monastic head-covering. Clothed monastics are those who are given a blessing to wear almost the complete habit of a monk or nun, but who have not yet made permanent monastic vows. Clothed monastics are still called by their baptismal names, but with the title “Sister” or “Brother” added before it. Professed monastics are fully enrolled monks and nuns. Professed monastics have gone through the ceremony of monastic tonsuring (ritual hair-cutting) in the Monastery Church. They have been given a new monastic name and, in Orthodox monasteries, they are given the title of “Mother” or “Father”. They have permanently committed themselves to living the full monastic life in the monastery, in obedience to their superior, for the rest of their earthly lives.

Who is in charge in a monastery? In a monastery there are two kinds of authority, sometimes combined in one person, but not always.

The first kind of authority is that given to the “superior” of the monastery, the monk or nun usually called Abbess or Abbot. Usually the Abbess or Abbot in a monastery is elected by the other monastics to be their leader, their superior, though sometimes this position is one to which a person is appointed by the Bishop. Once installed (installation is a task accomplished by the Bishop), the Abbess or Abbot has complete authority in the monastery. All the monastics live under his or her obedience. Nothing is done without his or her blessing. In a monastery for men the Abbot is almost always, also, an ordained priest, so that he can lead the liturgical life of the monastery. In a monastery for women (sometimes called a “convent”, though not usually among the Orthodox), the Abbess is, of course, not ordained to the priesthood. Rather, priests are assigned to come to the monastery to serve the services. Yet, because the Abbess is fully in charge in the monastery, when a priest comes to the monastery to serve, he must receive her blessing to serve. (Years ago, when I was in Russia, I was in a monastery for women that was being visited by the Patriarch himself. The Patriarch stood in a place of honor in the monastic church, beyond the iconostasis, in the altar area where the priest serves at the altar table. And, there the Abbess stood next to the Patriarch, clearly still in charge of her monastery.)

The second kind of authority in a Monastery is spiritual or charismatic authority. Sometimes, a monastery is blessed to have as part of the community a particularly gifted monk or nun, usually an experienced older person, who has developed by the grace of God tremendous spiritual gifts. While this person may not be the Abbess or Abbot, he or she still has tremendous spiritual authority in the monastery, and is usually consulted closely by the Abbot or Abbess before any decisions are made. Usually these spiritually gifted people are given the honorary title of “Elder” or “Eldress”.

What are the day-day-day living arrangements in a monastery? Each monastic has his or her own “cell,” which is the monastic name for the simple room in which a monk or nun lives. In that cell, the monk or nun not only rests, but also prays and studies. Each monastic has a “cell rule,” which is a set of prayers that they have been assigned by their superior to accomplish in private. Each monk or nun also has duties, usually termed “obediences”, which he or she accomplishes on behalf of the community as a whole. Such obediences include, cooking, cleaning, sewing, showing hospitality to the guests, maintaining the chapel, preparing and directing the liturgical music, and much more. Some monasteries have appropriate business ventures, such as candle-making, vestment sewing, icon painting, wood carving, book-binding, etc. So a monk or nun may have duties connected to that work as well. Meals are taken in common, and are, of course, prepared in strict accord with the fasting disciplines of the Church. Usually, monastics never eat meat, not even on feast days.

What is the liturgical life in a monastery? Each day in a monastery all the liturgical services are served. Usually they are grouped together in two or three “bunches.” On most days the order of services is something like this: Early in the morning the following services are served, all in order: The Midnight (middle-of-the-night) Office, the Matins (Orthros), the First, Third, and Sixth Hours, and the Divine Liturgy. In the late afternoon or early evening the following services are served: the Ninth Hour and Vespers. Finally, in the late evening, just before everyone goes to bed, the Compline Service is served. At the end of Compline all the monastics, in order, from the most senior to the most junior, ask each other’s forgiveness and then they all retire to their cells for the night. Through the night total silence is kept in the monastery, as each monk or nun prays and rests in his or her cell.

Hospitality to pilgrims (serious guests, that is, people who are visiting the monastery in order to benefit spiritually and not just to be “tourists”) is an important part of monastic life, so it is quite possible to visit and spend time at an Orthodox monastery. One’s visit, however, should be arranged well in advance and be carefully structured in obedience to the community. Some monasteries do allow “day visitors” to attend the liturgical services in the Monastic Church, but those visitors are expected not to arrive too long before the services start or to stay too long after they end. Visitors are to respect the lifestyle of the monastics. Visitors, of course, are expected to comport themselves appropriately. Proper behavior includes asking the blessing of the Abbot or Abbess, greeting the monastics with respect in whatever way is the established etiquette in that particular monastery, speaking quietly and not too much, and dressing modestly and conservatively. Usually, each monastery provides a set of guidelines laying out that monastery’s expectations of their visitors—some monasteries are more austere than others.

[There is much more to be said about life in Orthodox monasteries, so watch this space in upcoming bulletins for more information about the day-to-day in monasteries.]