

HIEROMONK ISIHJE ROGIĆ, Serbian Orthodox Church, MONASTERY OF KOVILJ

## Monasticism in the Contemporary World

I would like to begin this talk with two opposing scenes. It is 3 o'clock after midnight. In a dark and strange apartment with several strange people and loud disturbing music coming through from some corner, a heroin addict of 12 years, having shot his vein with the drug, groans as he falls into unconsciousness. At the very same moment, in a monastery not far away, a monk jumps out of his bed and prepares himself for his monastic prayer rule. He has been doing this almost every night, ever since he entered the monastery 12 years ago. Running his prayer rope through his fingers, he silently repeats the blessed Jesus prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me...

This short script, with its mysterious moment which brings together the two distant worlds, introduces us to our topic. In the suffering addict, we can see the fallen man or woman, living in a fallen world.

We are living in this fallen world, a society of fallen men and women. Such a society does not aim—and, indeed, cannot aim—to become paradise; at best, it can strive not to become hell! The Church and Her children, people of God, exist in this world, but are not *of* this world.

### The Church, a Community of Saints

The Church is the Lord coming into the world; the Church is the *man* whom the paralytic from the Gospel had hopelessly hoped for, and who saves him exclaiming, “Rise, take up your bed, and walk” (John 5:8). But the Church is not the Lord Jesus Christ alone, coming in human nature; nor is She the Holy Spirit alone, pouring out on the great Day of Pentecost. The Church is the divine-human (theanthropic) organism whose head is Christ, and whose body is the renewed people, all those who believed in Christ, in the Holy Spirit.

The Church as a community of the holy is, in itself, a perfect social system, being a community of men and women united with the Lord, and each one with the others by a bond of love. However, it is, at the same time, a communion of the same men and women who are inclined to sin and to fallen passions, which they must oppose through repentance and spiritual effort, in order to attain sanctity to as high a degree as possible.

Therefore, the first and foremost social mission of the Church is building Herself as a perfect society, a community of saints. Thus our Lord's imperative, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.” (1 Peter 1:16). We must be very clear that the mission of the Church—and, indeed, the life of the Church—is being manifest in the Holy Liturgy. Serving it and participating in it is the source of our life as people of God.

With Her gifts of grace, the Church is involved in the life of the world. She cares about the salvation of her people, as well as the humanity as a whole, proclaiming the Gospel and living it

through action in the world, but always remaining unchanged as the Body of Christ and community of saints.

### The Monastic Tradition in the Church

Monasticism is a special, grace/phenomenon in the Church. It originated as a spontaneous lay movement of certain members of the Church who withdrew not only from this world, but even from that part of Church containing elements of worldliness. This withdrawal is carried out through an interaction between their free will and disposition, on the one side, and **special** Divine grace, on the other. It is reflected in the tripartite monastic vow of chastity, obedience and poverty. We need to stress the **specialty**, the uniqueness of this gift, referred to by Christ in Matthew when he speaks of those “who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom for heaven's sake. He that is able to receive it, let him receive it.” (19:12)

In desiring a more radical, uncompromising life in accordance with the Bible, these people gradually founded special communities, monasteries, in which they would be able to live out, to a more fulfilling extent, this calling, in repentance and ascetic struggle.

Monasticism is a social phenomenon. Just as we earlier stated about the Church, monasticism also has two kinds of social meaning: **Firstly**, it is in itself a highly structured kind of society. Naturally, it is entirely integrated into the Church; there is absolutely nothing that separates it from the Church.

Secondly, monasticism also exists as an element of the general society and the world. This may seem to be a paradox, considering the fact that monasticism is essentially withdrawal from, and abandoning of, the world and everything which is of the world. However, the reason behind the monastic withdrawal explains this statement. The principal idea, and ideal, the purpose of monasticism is the same as that of the Church as a whole—it is love, love of God and love of neighbor. Therefore, we could assert that the main social function of monasticism is attaining and manifesting this love, through prayer for the whole world.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matt 22)

A monastic community, then, with its elaborate rules and structure, is maximally and directly dedicated to this goal, and it is the best setting for attaining to it, as far as is humanly possible in this world.

Monasticism as a significant movement developed in the fourth century when the Church was recognized as a part of the society. It quickly became a powerful part of the Church, and subsequently, of society as a whole. As a repository of human resources advancing in piety, aptitude, motivation, dedication and education, it gradually took part in the life of the Church, becoming eventually Her dominant agent and force.

Thus began the social ministry of monastics and monasteries. Ever remaining true to their monastic ideal of prayer for the whole world, some of them pursued various means to help the society, particularly its needy segments. This was first carried out within the monasteries; but eventually, specialized, monastically operated centers were formed. Famous examples of St Basil's

facilities in Caesarea of Cappadocia, St Sava in medieval Serbia, or the more recent ones of St John of Kronstadt in Russia come to mind.

### **The Kovilj Monastery**

I belong to the Kovilj Orthodox Monastery in Serbia. It is located close to the cities of Novi Sad and, a bit further, Belgrade, the capital. The present brotherhood was founded in 1990 under the blessing and the fatherly care of our bishop, the Right Reverend Irinej of Novi Sad. At that time, he appointed the young priest-monk Porfirije to be the Abbot and to form a brotherhood in the vacant Kovilj Monastery. Soon, several people striving towards monasticism joined him. Our Abbot was elected an Auxiliary Bishop in 1999, when he remained at the head of our Monastery, all the way until last year, when he finally moved to Zagreb, Croatia, in order to assume his new position as Metropolitan there.

Most people joining the monastery—and this is generally the case today—came from backgrounds which were either altogether indifferent to faith and Church, or accepting, but in a rather vague and formalistic way. For us the task of education in the monastic life had to go parallel with learning basic facts of Christianity. Our Abbot was not only our spiritual father, but also our teacher of elementary catechesis. But this state of things was helpful in an important way, because it prevented us from pride and viewing ourselves as spiritually superior to the increasing numbers of visitors and pilgrims. A strong sense of fellowship and brotherly love developed, not only among the brethren, but also including our guests, both those who came to Holy Liturgy on Sundays and feast days, as well as those who stayed with us for several days.

In the 1990s the Church in Serbia was undergoing a wide revival; people were discovering faith and joining the Church. It was very novel and exciting. Youth, but many adults as well, were getting baptized and coming to Church services. Books appeared on Christianity, pious living, spirituality, theology, and were hungrily read and studied. The existing churches, which had previously stayed cold and almost empty, were now packed with new faithful; and numerous new ones were being built. Our monastery rode this immense wave, taking a very active part in it. The brotherhood numbered six in the first year, growing by one or two every following year.

With the risk of being found immodest, I dare mention some of our activities. We try to help the needy and the poor; we have established and are developing our property where we can employ people from our village and surrounding places. The brethren, but by far most of all, our Abbot, actively participated in witnessing to the Church, Christian life and values, as well as those specifically monastic, through media and the press. Indeed, the very first Christian-educational program run on national television in the early 90s, called, *The Primer of Orthodoxy*, was for the most part authored by and even filmed in our Monastery.

### **The Land of the Living Community**

However, perhaps the most significant social ministry we have been blessed and honored to participate in is certainly the Land of the Living Community for the rehabilitation of those suffering from various addictions. It was formed and developed through a long period of effort and struggle. First, individual addicts began visiting the Monastery, along with many other guests; they

suffered from special problems and had specific needs. We responded, treating each of them individually, but to no great avail. Gradually, we realized that such efforts were not sufficient, so we established a specialized facility for that purpose. We received generous help from the renowned, highly developed and experienced Community of Cenacolo, internationally run by the Catholic Church. We modified the method, adjusting it to our needs and circumstances, and in 2004 the first home began to operate.

Now, a decade later, there are six such homes in which more than a hundred people live in Christian, Gospel-based communities. Together they strive not only to free themselves from the terrible burden of addiction, but through repentance and spiritual struggle to restore themselves as human beings, created in the image and likeness of God. It is impossible to convey the joy and sense of fullness when we experience this in every person who joins and strives in the communities.

However, the Land of the Living Community has an even wider impact on society. Following the initiative of our own Bishop Irinej of Bačka, several other bishops recognized and supported its value and have joined the project, either opening a home in their own diocese, or seriously considering to do so.

Conceived in the monastery, and even entailing a rather monastic-like organization of the homes, this project reaches out to, and incorporates, numerous inspired and devoted parish priests, physicians, medical and social professionals, entrepreneurs and many other people from all walks of life. Municipal authorities of the cities of Novi Sad, Belgrade, and others; various institutions and companies have been included. We have signed documents of cooperation with the Medical Society of Serbia and the Social Service of Novi Sad. It is an almost immeasurable field of people and organizations, each investing themselves, their capacities and means, and, above all, their good will and prayer in this God blessed endeavor.

Naturally, the key role belongs to our beloved brothers and sisters who live in the community, striving to battle their addiction and their sins and receiving healing, both physical and spiritual.

This brings us back to the two characters from the beginning. The addict went through a terrible rest of the night, and had a powerful experience of remorse. When he woke up that afternoon, he finally decided to go to the monastery he had been considering for a very long time, and to ask for help. Eventually, he entered the Land of the Living Community. He went through a long and difficult, but a most meaningful and fruitful thirty months of his life. Having been healed, he was sent back to life with Christ's words: You have been healed, sin no more, lest something worse happen to you.

**The End and Glory to God**