

The Mystery of the Monastic Life

Archimandrite Philarète (Egorov), Lishnya (Ukraine)

Dear brothers and sisters!

I am glad to greet you on behalf of His Beatitude Metropolitan Onuphrius of Kyiv and All Ukraine, the Primate of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, who blessed me to participate in this very relevant and important conference. Let me also pass you the greeting of my immediate bishop, Bishop Hilariy of Makariv, auxiliary bishop of the Kyiv Metropolitanate and area bishop of Makariv, who very much likes to visit Taizé and highly appreciates the work of the Taizé brothers. Let me thank the organizers for the invitation and for the joy of being together with all of you. I hope that our communication will help us come closer to God and to each other.

Now let me tell you about my understanding and experience of monastic life in Russian.

A Life Totally Oriented Towards God

In the vows that Taizé brothers give to God for all their life, they first of all choose obedience, non-possession, and chastity. In accordance with the early tradition of the holy fathers, which Brother Roger of happy memory loved, these are the chief criteria that characterize the life of a person who has fully dedicated him- or herself to God. Monasticism is a mystery of the Church. As an individual, a human is not self-sufficient. He or she only fulfils him- or herself as a person in communication with others. For monks and nuns this “Other” is God himself. The mystery of the monastic life lies in the fact that the one who takes vows entirely orients his or her life towards God. Consciously and voluntarily, such a person not only renounces marriage, but also many other things accessible to people normally, in order to concentrate on God as much as possible and to dedicate all one’s life, all one’s thoughts and deeds to him.

It is significant that one of the key texts that has been used in ascetic literature on monastic life is the Biblical book of Solomon’s *Song of Songs*, which, when speaking about the love between man and woman, touches upon such depths of the human nature that it can be equally applied to the love that exists between the human soul and God. The soul of a Christian is a bride of Christ, and it is exactly in this sphere that the “marriage potential” present in every human being is actualized in monasticism. Everything that an individual lacks in order to become a person and to fulfil one’s personal being in unity and in communication with the other (as it is revealed in the mystery of marriage), in monasticism is acquired through communication with God. And this is very important.

One should take monastic vows only in one case – if one feels an ardent calling to this kind of life. The monastic calling cannot be a momentary impulse: it should grow in one’s heart

for a long time to become clearer and stronger. If one is not certain of one's calling, if he or she hesitates, then he or she should not take vows. In his talks about marriage and monasticism, Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh spoke about the same thing: one should not enter into marriage as long as there is a doubt that exactly this person is the one with whom he or she is ready to share his or her whole life, for whom he or she is ready to sacrifice his or her life. An analogous approach should be taken in relation to taking the vows.

Different Forms of Service

It is significant that monasticism may have different forms. There are monks or nuns who live in monasteries and monks or nuns who live in the world. There are monks or nuns who carry out church obedience by teaching in theological schools; there are monks or nuns who do charity work or social work, those who take care of the poor. There are monks who are parish priests. The external picture of the monastic life may be very different. But the inner essence does not change. And first of all, it lies in unceasing standing before God. On the premise of that, it can be stated that someone who does not feel the calling towards solitude, towards giving his or her life to God entirely, should not become a monk or nun. Monasticism, which is a mystery, transfigures the whole life of the person and changes it drastically and radically.

As a monk, who was ordained as a priest and who took monastic vows, one of which is the vow of obedience, I was blessed by the Church to carry out my service to God, the Church and my neighbours as a parish priest in a small village near Kyiv. Having learned about the experience of establishing of parish life by those pastors who united people around Christ and who created Christian communities, in our parish we decided that we had to create a family-like Christian community, which, first of all, would live the liturgical and prayer life of the Church. We realized that lay people, too, could follow their narrow and saving path to Christ, without abandoning their family and communal life, by holding firm to simplicity of life, obedience to the Church and inner chastity. The Orthodox theologian Paul Evdokimov called this approach "inner monasticism." We realized the necessity of regular daily common prayer. If possible, this prayer has to be said together, or it can be said separately (as we say, "in one's cell"). All people, and not only those who have taken vows, can regularly gather together for a common prayer in the church. And this, as we have seen, can indeed happen even in the situation of a village parish.

Not of the World but for the World

Such a prayer has to be combined with common work. In other words, it is possible to follow the ancient monastic rule: "*Ora et labora.*" But even outside the church, the prayer should go on, as one should "pray more often than breathe." And out of this prayerful standing before God comes the necessity of common social service to the world and to

one's neighbours. Meanwhile, God, according to his Providence, can both permit temptations and send new strength, and this can be manifested in many different ways.

It seems to me that the representatives of early Christian communities followed God along this path of common prayer and common work. Having met Taizé brothers, having welcomed them at our parish and having visited their hospitable community, we saw in them people who live in the West, orienting themselves towards the patristic tradition. And this is very important – to live by rooting ourselves in the tradition of the early Church of Christ. This is the basis of our formation in Christ, which has to be unending. And this, of course, has to be coupled with the struggle with oneself, with our personal repentance, and with our learning to see Christ in our neighbours.

For that, it is very important in contemporary circumstances that a community does not get closed in on itself and remains open to the world. It is important that its representatives would be not *of* this world but *for* this world. It is necessary that we live in simplicity and joy, in the joy of mercy, the joy of brotherly love. Brother Roger spoke the truth: “For the one who loves selflessly, life becomes filled with pure beauty.” He also said: “Happy is the community, in which there is no end to kind-heartedness, for then Christ shows Himself incomparably to the world through it” (*There Is No Greater Love*). Let us recall the words of St. Seraphim of Sarov: “Acquire peace for your soul – and thousands will be saved around you.” Having heard this call, let us strive towards it. And may the light of Christ, which has shined in our hearts, forever and ever enlighten all people.

I prayerfully wish brother Alois – the prior of the Taizé Community and the successor of Brother Roger – and all the brothers to continually grow in Christ, and I express my cordial gratitude to them.