

My name is Fr. Archimandrite Sergius and I am the 16<sup>th</sup> Abbot of America's oldest Orthodox Monastery founded by St. Tikhon of Moscow in 1905. We have 5 canonized saints who walked, taught, prayed at and loved St Tikhon's Monastery. Daily liturgy has been served at the Monastery more or less daily for 114 years. Our monastery builder, Archbishop Arseny, was also instrumental in founding St. Tikhon's Seminary later in 1938 (and its interesting to note all the three major seminaries in the lower 48 were founded during the same year). We strive to serve the Church in various capacities including serving the full cycle of daily services, our life of prayer, teaching at the Seminary, publishing, making candles, offering hospitality and offering whatever we can for the building up of the Church.

With God's help, St. Tikhon's Monastery currently has 15 monastics and is a financially sound institution of the Orthodox Church in America (all of our financial records for each year are posted and available on our website). With your prayers, we hope to continue our service to the Church in the multitude of ways that we have been able to do for so many years to come.

A question might be asked by the Church: "What can we do to help monasticism grow in America?" This desire for growth is a good desire that must be fueled first by an appreciation and admiration for the monastic life and its place in the life of the church. (We must note that the encouragement of spiritually healthy families, homes and parish Churches are a must for a proper appreciation of the monastery.)

Monasticism is as old as the Scriptures which have examples in the Old and New Testaments of those who consecrated themselves solely the service of God: from the Prophet Elijah to St. John the Baptist to St. Paul the Apostle. All were concerned about the one thing needful and focused the entirety of their life upon it. Monastics seek to the greatest degree possible to emulate the life of the Lord and in dying to the world they seek to begin to live the life that is anticipated in the world to come today. This is not something that should seem strange to us all for noted theologian Hierotheos Vlachos tells us: all of us "Orthodox Christians are not waiting for the second coming but through the life of the Church we are already living the life anticipated after the second coming today (and that by grace.)"

The work of the monastery and of the monastic quintessentially is prayer. St. Silouan says that when real prayer ceases then the end of the world will come...and why is this? It is because prayer (whether corporate liturgical prayer or personal prayer) is the only way to effect our union with God which is the very reason for which we were created. In the OCA today we have approximately 30 monasteries, sketes and hermitages which strive to answer this call to prayer. Each in their own way, whether a hermitage (a single monastic), a skete (which is a few monastics) or a cenobium (which has many monastics), strives to live the martyric life of monasticism in whatever context. This witness of "prayer first" is what the monastic strives to remind all us of and when prayer is first, St. Silouan says the Lord is first.

Fr. Silouan at St. Michael's Skete in New Mexico tells us that: "Prayer of the heart is real, and ultimately the only reality--the eye which perceives Truth as it is. Life is communion in love."

The monastic has no other model and way other than Christ Himself who, not married, and having few possessions was obedient unto the death of the Cross. Christians, whatever their vocation, are called to be like unto Christ to the greatest degree possible for them within their given circumstances. To imagine that monastics have a different call or a different model than those who are married is not a correct way of thinking. We in the Church must never allow ideology to pit us against each other with the idea that somehow there is an "us and a them." It is rather the "we" of the Church who must work together, each with our own gifts that God has given us as different parts of the same body. The "we" of the Church must never give into erroneous paradigms that which posit a greater and lesser vocation for our shared high calling. We are all called to union with God. The way in which we work this union out, in the community of marriage or the community of a monastic family, will be different for each one. The highest calling is the one that is right for each one which enables him to achieve this union...however, whichever path we choose, we will accomplish this goal through a voluntary martyrdom, according to the Lord's words: "Whoever wishes to save His life will lose it."

An important development over the past 5 years that has helped our monasteries grow has been the yearly gathering of monastic superiors presided over by Metropolitan Tikhon. For several days each October, the superiors gather and discuss issues of common concern. These gatherings have been quite fruitful, promoting mutual understanding and helping us discover our mutual bond and commitment to the monastic life. We are greatly indebted to His Beatitude, Metropolitan Tikhon for taking the time and creating this opportunity for the superiors of the monasteries to reflect and grow together. There is a current need for a revision of the 13<sup>th</sup> article of the OCA statute concerning the monasteries and this will be a continuing conversation that the monasteries and the statute board will hopefully work to present at the next AAC.

One of the monastic Superiors, Br Christopher of New Skete in Cambridge Massachusetts tells us that: "A wise monk once observed that one of the requirements of a monastic vocation was a deep love for people and this truth runs contrary to the stereotype that monastics are those who find that contact with people gets in the way of their search for God. Nothing could be further from the truth. When we look at the best of the monastic tradition we see elders who were unfailingly kind and compassionate to all those they came in contact with. They are an example and an inspiration for all of us, revealing a wholeness that illumines what true sanctity is all about."

Mother Christophora, Abbess of Holy Transfiguration Monastery in Elwood City, says that: "The monastic life is a most beautiful and blessed way of life. If people knew what a joyous life it is, we believe more would be willing to answer this call."

Br. Christopher of New Skete continues: "There is an abiding concern over how to attract new vocations to monastic life. It is not a matter of simply accumulating warm bodies. Monasticism demands monks and nuns who have a deep desire to dedicate their

lives to God and who reflect a mature level of psychological and spiritual health. Monastic life is not a place to run from the responsibilities of life, for people who are clinically depressed normally do not flourish here. Indeed, the challenges and stresses of ordinary life are just as present in a monastery as they are in the world. The majority of monks and nuns experience deep joy in their lives, a joy that is rooted in following this mysterious attraction that has its source in God. True happiness is not found in a life of self-indulgence, material prosperity, and success as defined by the standards of secular society. Rather, we find it when we are in touch with reality as it truly is: life permeated with the presence and mystery of God.” It is through this that we realize that our life is itself a sacrament and the heart is the Altar. It is at this Altar we are called to offer our life to the Lord so that He may in turn give us His.

Mother Gabriella, Abbess of Holy Dormition Monastery in Rives Junction explained that : “Monastic communities in our days strive to provide an example of Christian life as authentic as possible, so as to be role models for families and parish communities.”

Sister Cecilia, Superior of New Skete tells us: “Monastic life serves the Church primarily in a hidden way, and at the same time serves as a guiding light in a world increasingly characterized by confusion, violence, and selfishness. In short, it is a grace filled, wonderful life.”

The monastery reminds of a way that is time honored in the Church: the need for spiritual support, for confession, and for spiritual direction. These time honored and tested tools in our Church must be revisited over and over again (for the greatest freedom we can know is under the stole of confession.) The dire need of all of us for continued direction, inspiration, and for someone to listen to the voice of our spiritual pain and suffering is an absolutely imperative. A monastic once said to that we don’t need holy elders as much as we need some to witness our suffering and tells us that it is going to be okay...and this happens the most effectively during the sacrament of confession. Monastic life reminds us of the dire need for transparency in confession, a transparency that can heal us and protect us from all the devices of the devil. Someone who is completely transparent, holding nothing back during confession, will be healed and freed from the influence of the dark powers which are trying to control and destroy them. This is something that the monasteries hold to as a means to spiritual health and well-being and it must be done in the context of a trusted spiritual relationship with a confessor that seeks to grow deeper and more transparent as time passes.

Mentorship in our church sometimes is limited and new priests in our Church are sometimes left to their own devices to find their way. The dean system in the Church is a good beginning to this system of mentorship and accountability. And, it seems necessary that deans and mentors be chosen with this specific perspective in mind: that it be an experienced priest who is trustworthy and has a pastor’s heart. We all need to know at the most basic level that someone else cares. We can say for certain that the future of monasticism will be based largely in part on healthy priests who confess regularly, have accountability and appreciate the important place that monasticism has in our Church. When this happens, a spiritually healthy and spiritually supported priest will cultivate monasticism in his parish as a natural outgrowth of his own spiritual life and the life of

the Church ...monastic life will not be seen as an aberration but as the natural extension of Who Jesus Christ is and what He calls all of us too: The Kingdom of God...and this kingdom begins now and is present in the Church today as St. Paul reminds us: Today is the day of salvation.

The current dean system that is in place has been a great help to the Church and provides a model for problem solving, accountability and strength. I would urge the Holy Synod to consider that this same approach of support be applied to the Monasteries. We need a monastic dean that can be a trusted liaison between the Bishop or Metropolitan and the monastic community...one who has been tested and trusted to hear the needs of the communities and advise them as to how best to proceed in harmony with the will of the Bishop and Diocese. That sense that “someone has our back” should be something we continue to cultivate in the Church “a buddy system” where we know that there is someone else there who cares about us, our community and the Church at large. (And by the way...I am not volunteering for this task nor would I current accept this task but I can say with absolute certainty that this is a great need at the present time and has been a need since I was charged with being the head of St. Tikhon’s Monastery ten years ago.)

Further, we as the Church, both priests and laity must never, ever, ever discourage a monastic or priestly vocation based on our own thinking. Monastic and priestly callings are similar many respects in that it is a mystery that happens in the depths of the heart and it is between God and the one who is being called. Ultimately the best encouragement for those who feel called is to focus on their life of prayer and to visit the monastery to see if the monastery is the right place for them. Our encouragement of vocations and encouraging people in the Church to go taste and see for themselves is an absolute necessity. It is a very personal thing and we must be careful.

Another way that we can grow the monastic life in our church is by making a pilgrimage to a monastery by ourselves for quiet retreat or with our parish community for a day or overnight visit. This will help us all to continue to appreciate and understand the value of our monasteries and the place that they have in the Church (I notice this when I myself go to other monasteries). Nothing can be so spiritually refreshing or uplifting as receiving the light and blessing that comes from a well-established monastery where the monastics are struggling to pray for the world and to work out their salvation (Mount Athos). As one monastic said: the monastics in the monastery taste of hell so that when people visit they can taste of heaven. I invite you to visit your local monastery or to make a pilgrimage to St. Tikhon’s Monastery to partake of monastic hospitality that will hopefully enrich your life and heart.

It is imperative to understand that it is in the crucible of daily liturgical living that many if not most of the difficult and time-consuming liturgical questions that we currently face will be resolved ...most often the resolution comes about as heads are butting and tempers are fuming. It is that daily grind of daily liturgical life that historically has been the arena in which our liturgical tradition has been worked out and forged...the very liturgical life that we have today. This is the necessary context in which many of our newer liturgical books have been worked out in and which Metropolitan Tikhon has

approved. Historically, it is in this fiery crucible that we find our way liturgically especially in the area of translation. Due to its many and varied members, a monastery provides the right environment for the difficult discussion that will have to take place as the process continues.

Christ is the same yesterday today and forever. And so it is with monasticism. What St. Anthony did so many centuries ago is what monastics strive to do today. The mission is the same, the prayer is the same, the Church is the same because our Lord is the same. We must not allow in the Church for an us and a them. United we stand but divided we fall...the devil divides but God's love will unite us in an indissoluble bond. It is this love that we must strive to have for each other which will overcome all obstacles. When our prayerful loves prevails we will find the whole Church united in our own heart. We must support each other: some of us are Bishops, some priests, some deacons and some are monastics. We are the Church and we owe it to each other to love one another... and this love gives the space in which the other can grow and thrive. St. Tikhon's monastery, in my mind, is one of the most important institutions in our Church, a beautiful flag ship which we must support, is our duty to love and to visit. It is our duty to support our local monasteries ...to help them as they grow; to pray for them and to ask for their prayers. I cannot tell you how difficult my life has been as the Abbot of St. Tikhon's monastery. It has nearly killed me. However, I would gladly be killed for the beautiful holy place and the beautiful work that is done by the beautiful people at St. Tikhon's monastery and seminary if need be because I believe in St. Tikhon's Monastery as much as I believe in the God who founded it and Who lives and dwells there. It is a beautiful thing and a terrible thing...I would beseech you to continue your good work wherever you are in America for the Church and know that we are praying for you every day, praying for the entire Church so that your work may be blessed, that it may be fruitful, that you will be strong, that you will know that God loves you, and that love of God would be alive in your heart. This is the work of the monastics. This is the life that we offer you to support. Please receive our love and our prayers and pray for us that we too together may find the Kingdom of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Mother Thecla: "Monastic life is a wonderful way to be in relationship with our Triune God and His people. The life is one of prayer and hospitality made possible by God's grace. There is a great need for this witness in our world and may those whom He calls have the courage to respond."

Fr. Innocent: "Take your kids to the monastery. Let them experience it. Teach them that it is a wonderful thing to live the monastic life."

Mother Raphaela: "We will continue to bring the crisis in Christian life vocations before the Church. While clerical vocations are certainly central to its life, without a sense of calling among the faithful in parish communities, both the Christian marriages which must undergird parish life and monastic vocations will continue to be endangered. The Lord Himself bore witness to the need to prepare disciples who can enter into the harvest of salvation, truly for the Life of the World. While our vocation may not often take us out into the world, we believe God uses prayer to reach places where none of us can go in person, where only He can work to save and heal."