

A MONASTIC MANUAL
TRANSLATION AND INTRODUCTION

BY
ANDREAS TILLYRIDES

INTRODUCTION

From the very beginning of Christianity, following the words of Jesus, «Go and sell what you own and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me», many have followed the ascetic life. By living devoted and celibate lives, they spent much time praying and serving the poor and the sick of their communities.

In the third century monastic life was organised more fully. The example of Saint Antony who went into the desert to seek God and be near him was the beginning of a new type of monasticism which has persisted in some places up until our own times. Antony meditated and prayed, fasted, lived an uncomfortable life; these were the means which he used to chastise his body so that his soul might grow in its love for God.

Saint Pachomius introduced another type of monasticism. He felt that life with others with equal interests and virtues might be a better occasion for the practice of charity; his goal was to bring people together in order to save them. Thus we have the first example of cenobetic life in the monastery — whereas Antony was an ascetic on his own, a hermit.

In recent years there has been a revival of Orthodox monasticism, not only among the Greek-speaking people on the Holy Mountain and elsewhere, but also among Westerners who have been received into the Orthodox Church.

The monastic life is embraced by those people who have left the world in order to follow a life characterised by obedience, chastity and poverty. The monastic ideal is not something alien to life, but represents a purified, christianized form of life. It is not individualistic, but constitutes a response to a call for transfiguration and purification through prayer for the monk's own community, but also for the world at large. At all times monks are possessed by an immense faith in God and their lives are strengthened and spiritualized by ardent prayer.

In monastic communities there has been a turning towards the

Jesus prayer. Every soul who relinquishes a materialistic way of life to enter the heavenly and angelic life of monasticism seeks tranquility in order to practice the Jesus prayer most fully. The Jesus prayer can be recited either in the monk's cell, in the church with his fellow monks, or even while he is working. Through the Jesus prayer the monk enters into communication with Almighty God, who is present at all times and in all places; thus the monk becomes one with God and achieves holiness. The monk who has made real progress in prayer will, by the saintliness of his life, be able to transform those who are around him. Thus Saint Gregory of Nyssa is right when he says «one who lives with a man who is holy and pure and elect will become such himself».

It is in the perspective of the foregoing remarks that I present below an English translation of a Greek Monastic Manual. The translation of this Greek text was done in Oxford in 1975. It was published in the Greek newspaper of Trieste «Nea Hemera» (1911). The author and date of this Manual are not indicated. The work contains passages from the New Testament and from the Fathers of the Church.

In presenting this work of spirituality, I hope to make some small contribution to the contemporary reflection and studies on monasticism.

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A MONASTIC MANUAL

that is

Canons relating to the life of a monk, according to which he must live in the Monastery so as to be pleasing to God and to obtain the salvation of his soul.

I

The word «monk» means one who has abandoned the fellowship of men and wishes to live in solitude. Such were the ancient ascetics who lived in mountains and in dens and in caves of the earth, and such in our days are the ascetics of the Holy Mountain of Athos. They were called ascetics because their constant concern was spiritual effort, to raise their souls to God, and to mortify the body's desires and passions, that it may reach a state of perfect «*apathia*» (freedom from passions).

II

To-day, because monks live in a Monastery and form a brotherhood, the word «monk» has lost its main meaning and it now denotes someone who lives far from the world and from society, and has set himself free from all worldly cares, in his desire to dedicate himself to God alone by practising the monastic virtues, and thus applying to himself the word of Paul: «I live, yet no longer, I, but Christ liveth in me (Gal. 2/20).

III

The father of monastic life, Saint Antony the Great, brought monks together in the same place and recommended life in common, without however, precluding the ascetic life in solitude. Blessed Antony saw the solitary ascetic way as much higher than life in common, but that it demanded great qualities of the monk who would be a genuine hermit. Since not everyone has these spiritual and physical gifts, he established communal monasticism, so that through emulation of others, the tree might grow up whose fruits are an angelic manner of life.

IV

The common life is a life in which everything both material and spiritual is possessed in common. There is the common table for meals and the common spiritual table; there are the common struggles for virtue. In the community the older members serve as an example to the younger ones and to the novices, and instruct them in the spiritual life, while the younger brethren and novices try to imitate their seniors in experience and wisdom and above all in monastic perfection.

V

The Monastery is a training-ground, or rather, a spiritual stadium, where anyone who enters must put off the whole weight of worldly thoughts and cares just as those who race in the stadium should run as lightly clad as possible.

VI

The runners in the stadium are «temperate in all things». «Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown», to use the words of the Apostle Paul (I Cor. 9/25). But those who live in the Monastery, the stadium of virtue, wrestle to win an incorruptible crown, the reward of their high calling, which is the crown of eternal life and blessedness.

VII

The athletes at the stadium must prepare themselves properly for each particular athletic contest, and above all by self-discipline. So also the monk, when he enters the stadium of virtue and spiritual conflict and struggle, which the Monastery is, should be armed with the weapons of the spirit. For he will be fighting against the spirits of evil, that is to say against the enemy of God and man, the devil.

VIII

The first weapon which constitutes the whole armour of the monk, which he must carry everywhere and at all times, from his entrance into the stadium until the end, is obedience, which is the essence of monastic virtue.

IX

The communal life is a community of monks, which takes its example from the life of the early Church, when those blessed and

thrice-blessed Christians possessed everything in common. However, each community, in order to maintain its life, is in need of leaders who may show the way towards its purpose and destiny, just as a flock of sheep needs a shepherd who will care for it. The apostles were the shepherds of that first community; the superiors and the Abbot are the pastors of the monks.

X

But for a community to make progress, it is necessary for those under obedience to carry out the commandments of their leaders. Just as in warfare the soldiers should obey the orders of the commander in order to assure a victory, so also in a monastery the monks, as soldiers of the heavenly King, continually fight against the enemy of mankind, the devil, and are required to be obedient to the instructions and decrees of their leader, that is the Abbot and the superiors.

XI

Obedience is the spiritual hallmark of the monk which must accompany all his actions. From obedience is born humility, which raises a man to God. Through humility, the monk quenches the fiery darts of the wicked and becomes like Christ our Lord, who humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even to death on the cross.

XII

Through obedience and humility the monk fights against his greatest enemy, pride and selfishness. The pride of Lucifer cast him into the pit of Hell; whereas the obedience and humility of Christ set him on the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the Heavens. Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven (Matth. 5/3).

XIII

From these two fundamental virtues of obedience and humility spring all the other virtues most essential for the common life, such as goodness, humble-mindedness, meekness, forbearance and mutual tolerance.

XIV

The Apostle Paul says, «Put on, therefore, as the elect of God,

holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering: forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye. And above all these things put on charity, which is the bond of perfection. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also ye are called in one body: and be ye thankful (Col. 3/12-16).

XV

The divine Apostle considers all the above-mentioned graces of the soul as a garment which the Christian, and especially the monk, must wear in order to live in the community, as well as to prove pleasing to God and be loved by his brothers. All men hate a proud and selfish person, and all revere the humble-minded. All dislike an angry and quarrelsome man, and conversely, all love the meak and forbearing. Everyone finds intolerable someone who is not himself tolerant, or who is hard-hearted, or stubborn or unforgiving. In contrast, there is general admiration for someone who can endure the weakness of his fellows, and who turns «the other cheek», without returning evil for evil, and who forgives others. All such virtues as meekness, goodness, and forgiveness are the only ones which preserve peace among men. The summit and the heart of these virtues is love. Just as the members of the body receive their life from the blood which the heart sends through the arteries to the whole body, even to its smallest part, so also does love animate and warm all the virtues and give life to them. For all the virtues without love are nothing (I Cor. 13/1-3).

XVI

The monks in the Monastery must be of one spirit, so as to think alike and not to do anything except to excel each other in lowliness and to be concerned not only for themselves but for others also.

XVII

The monks of a community constitute one spiritual body and possess one soul. As the body has many members but all these members are directed by one and the same soul, so also all the monks are distinct from the others in body, but their soul is one because they all pursue one identical purpose: the soul's salvation.

The body, in order to live, must have all its members working in harmony, and in order for them to co-operate, no member can say to another «I have no need of thee». So also the monastic body consists of many monks who are working, each according to his ability, for the preservation of the body. As the hand cannot say to the foot «I have no need of you» so also the baker cannot say to the cook «I do not need you». Let each man then remain in the place to which he has been called. Were you put in the kitchen? Stay there and do your work with a good conscience so as to obtain your reward. Were you called to serve at tables, to work in the garden or at the mill? Stay there to be pleasing to God and the brotherhood.

XVIII

The monk must not seek the duty which he thinks superior or more honourable nor despise duties which seem of lower value. There must be no such distinction of duties. Some parts of the body appear to merit a higher esteem, as the head, eyes and ears, and others a lower place like the hands and feet, yet the superior parts cannot be without the lower, nor the lower without the higher. Similarly, in the monastic body there do exist duties of higher and lower repute; nevertheless they are both absolutely necessary for the life and maintenance of the monastery.

XIX

All men are not equally endowed in body or spirit, but one man has more abundant gifts than another. That is why in every human society there are different positions and posts, so that each person may be given an opportunity to prosper according to his ability. Equally in the monastery the monk should give thanks for whichever task the monastery allots to him without murmuring. For although the duties and tasks vary, the value of each one's soul is the same, and occasion for virtue is common to all.

XX

From the parable of the talents we learn that God distributes his gifts to men as he wishes, once more for the preservation of humanity. God asks each person to appear faithful to his calling and not to bury his talent. It is definitely not the type of work which brings honour upon the worker, but the good workman who brings honour to his task. If the gardener or the baker performs his duties well, he has more re-

ward than an Abbot who neglects his responsibility. The story of the shoemaker is well known. The blessed man was sitting at a doorway in Cairo practising his skill, and at the same time his virtue was so great that in the whole of Egypt there was to be found no holier man than him, and he was the only one found worthy to accomplish the miracle of moving a mountain.

XXI

What then, is the one thing necessary to all of us which Christ refers to in his saying, «But one thing is needful» (Lk. 10/42); one thing is the attainment of the kingdom of Heaven for the sake of which the apostles left all and followed Christ... ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit on on the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Mt. 19/27-28).

XXII

Therefore, the «one thing that is needful» for the monk is to leave the world and find the kingdom of Heaven in the desert. The monk is the good merchant who has found the precious pearl, and on finding it sells all his possessions to purchase it.

XXIII

In the Monastery the monk is, as Saint John Chrysostom says, like Adam in Paradise before his disobedience. Care not about the body, for Adam has serenity, calmness and a life without noise or disturbance; his only preoccupation being prayer and labour. But the monk has something greater than Adam, for he possesses the power and grace of Jesus Christ to fight against and overcome the devil, while Adam was not able to stand against the snares of the evil one.

XXIV

The snares of the evil one are many and varied, and they appear to the monk under many different forms. To one the tempter says «what is that food they are giving you here? Do you not remember the food which you used to eat in the world? This is the temptation of gluttony. The same temptation was faced by our Lord when the evil one said «let these stones be made bread» (Mt. 4/3). But as our Lord resist-

ed the temptation by saying that «man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God, so also the monk must receive with thankfulness what is put before him on the table, without grumbling, reflecting that the monks of old times lived on dry bread and water. He must realise that the kingdom of God is not in eating and drinking but in holiness; and that the Royal sons lived on simple food in order to win the heavenly banquet. He must often remember that he could not taste this heavenly food when he was living in the world in his own house.

XXV

Another temptation is that of petty ambition. The tempter comes and whispers into the ear of the monk. «Do you see how they despise you? You have been working in the Monastery for all these years and others have risen above you while you are put aside and neglected and remain continually at the same work without promotion». With these words the tempter often draws the unfortunate and unhappy monk into the trap of petty ambition. And with this temptation he torments him; allowing him no rest, or sleep, and often makes the monk lose all the rewards of monastic perfection, and return to the world.

XXVI

This temptation is the kind of ambition which our Lord withstood; the tempter promised Him all the Kingdoms of the world if He would fall down and worship him. But the Lord answered saying, «Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve» (Mt. 4/10). So also the monk must resist the temptation of ambition by saying «Get these hence, Satan, I have come into the Monastery to worship and venerate my God and I do not seek the world of sin which I have left behind in order to gain the one thing needful». If one of the brethren has an honorable position, this post is given to him so that he can be of service to the monastery, and not to arouse in him pride and boasting. If those who accept such posts do not prove themselves worthy of the task, what is their profit? Someone who has the simplest service but works well, is higher in the sight of God than a bishop and an Archimandrite and all others. As we said before, the shoemaker was higher than the Patriarch in virtue; miracles were performed by that simple cobbler,

XXVII

The ecclesiastical dignity of bishop, priest, or deacon, is given by the monastery alone, purely for service to the Church and for no other reason. And the Archbishop, and the Archimandrite, Chancellors, Hieromonks, and deacons, are simply servants of the Monastery. In regard to the monastic state they have the same value as he who fulfills the lowliest service. But as we have said above, all monks do not have the same qualifications. For this reason, the monastery assigns different duties to different people. The greater the dignity, the greater the responsibility towards God. Let the monk who is ambitious for honours reflect how great a responsibility is borne, for example, by an Archbishop who does not fulfil his service well, or a priest or deacon. He must then learn to find satisfaction in the very least task. When he considers that from the Archbishop, God will ask an account for the souls of all the monks; when he reflects that from the spiritual father, the priest or the deacon, God will demand great account if they perform their work carelessly, then he will easily turn aside from the temptation of petty ambition and love of glory and will confine himself to his own service, being sure that the salvation of his soul is far more certain when he proves successful in the performance of this duty, however small it may be.

XXVIII

One can discern petty ambition in certain dispositions; for example, considering the years of one's residence in the Monastery and feeling that one should be preferred above any brethren who came more recently than oneself. This temptation is indeed strong and powerful, and leads to strife and quarreling. «Do you, a monk, wish that others should reverence you and look up to you? Try to perform not many years but many virtues. When you have many virtues than you will learn not to seek preference and the first position from others, but, on the contrary, you will seek the last place, for humility always demands this. The last place elevates more than the first. The man dignifies the position and not the position the man.

XXIX

He that humbleth himself shall be exalted» (Lk. 14.14). This applies above all to monks. Humility is in every way the highest virtue, and blessed is the man who succeeds in attaining the great and lofty

virtue of humble-mindedness. The absence of this virtue causes much disorder and confusion in the life of the Monastery. One monk cannot endure a simple word or a single observation from another, even if it is unjustly spoken, and another returns evil for evil, and falls into anger, rage, blasphemy or judgement. Thus the devil gives thanks and rejoices that he has brought ruin to the monastic paradise of which we have written and has made of it an infernal place, a prison-house for the demons.

XXX

Finally take care, my brother monk, to make your calling sure and safe. Have in mind always the purpose of your entry into the Monastery. Ascend one by one the steps of the ladder of perfection until you reach heaven, following the example of the holy monks whose lives you should read and keep in mind, so as to meditate upon them day and night. Woe unto you, if you have come to the harbour of salvation only to be ship-wrecked and lose your soul.