

Introduction

To the Teacher:

This introduction to monasticism, written by Matushka Myra Kovalak, appears with some alterations in the lessons of this study unit. We offer it here as background for you, and as a source of information to share with your students. Much of the information is taken from the book *These Truths We Hold*, published by St. Tikhon's Orthodox Theological Seminary.

Do our students know that there are women altar servers in the Orthodox Church? Do they know there is a monastery where the monks train German Shepherd dogs, and the nuns make and sell cheesecakes all over the United States? Do they know that all Orthodox bishops are also monks, but not all monks (*St. Herman, for example*) are priests? Are they aware of the wonderful truth that a monk or nun is praying for them all the time?

This unit of study will give you the chance to share these facts, and many more, with your students.

Monastics (monks and nuns) are people called by God to live the Christian life in a special way. Some have answered this call to become closer to God by living a life of quiet solitude, away from the cares and busy life of the world. Others live, pray and work in communities called **monasteries**. All monastics live as **ascetics** (an ascetic is a person who practices self-denial so as to concentrate on a goal without worldly distractions.) This is true whether they live in solitude, or in communal monasteries.

Scripture tells us about prophets such as Moses and John the Baptist, and even Our Lord Himself, spending time alone in the wilderness and in closeness to God. Then, in the fourth century, St. Anthony the Great went to live in the desert and began the first established monastic communities. Then, monasteries grew throughout the **Holy Land**, the Middle East and the Mediterranean, spreading through Europe and the world. Some of the most beloved saints of the Church are monks and nuns, such as St. Herman, St. Innocent, St. Macrina, St. Raphael, St. Brigid, St. Tikhon, St. Sergius, St. Elizabeth, and many others.

Monastics live simply, without luxuries. They wear black rather than colorful clothes. They spend many hours each day in prayer and worship. But even though they are "away from" the world, they constantly pray for the world and for each and every one of us. Two Biblical passages that direct the lives of monastics, and tell us a good deal about why they live as they do, are Matthew 6: 25-33 and 19:21. (It might be worthwhile to read and discuss these with students.)

A person who desires to join a monastic community is first a **Novice**. This period of probation lasts for about three years. The Novice, addressed as **Brother** or **Sister**, learns under the guidance of one of the experienced monastic **elders**. The Novice is in training, both physically through labors and fasting, as well as spiritually through prayer and obedience to the elder. After a period of time (usually about three years) the Novice, who has up to now worn lay clothes, is permitted to wear the **Inner Riasa**. This is a simple black

robe with narrow sleeves. Monks wear a **skouphos**, a monastic cap. Nuns wear a simple head covering. At this point, the monastic will no longer marry.

Monastics practice poverty, chastity, humility, repentance and obedience. In time, the Novice may be elevated to the level of **Riasophor** monastic, still a Novice and not yet taking the final vows. At this point the Novice undergoes **tonsure**. Just as at baptism, the Novice makes an offering to God in the form of strands of hair cut in the shape of a cross. The Novice is vested in an **Outer Riasa** and **Kamilavka**, a flat-topped hat.

After another period of time, the head of the monastery may bless the Novice to take the next step: the **Lesser Schema**, the final tonsure and the taking of final vows. These life-long vows include renouncing worldly thoughts, living the faith in every word and deed, and being obedient for life. The monastic receives a new name, a cross and a candle, and then answers questions to prove obedience and intention.

Then comes the vesture in monastic dress. This includes the **Paraman**, a square cloth with depictions of the Cross as well as the spear, reed, and sponge, and an inscription reading "I bear in my body the wounds of the Lord." It is tied to the back and shoulders with strings, and reminds the wearer of having taken up the yoke of Christ. There is the **Inner Riasa**, a leather belt, and a long outer cloak called the **Mantiya**. This cloak has no arms, a reminder that the wearer in a sense no longer needs arms to do his or her own will because it is entirely Christ's will that determines what is to be done.

The head covering now is a **Klobuk** or **Kamilavka** with a veil—a garment guarding the wearer from vanity. The monastic is also given sandals and a prayer rope, a knotted rope with the knots used for counting prayers and prostrations. If a man, the monastic is now addressed as "Father" and is known as a **Schema Monk**. A woman is now addressed as "Mother" and is known as a **Schema Nun**.

A small number of monastics receive the order of the **Great Schema** or **Angelic Habit**. They are given a special vestment called the **Anavalos**, replacing the **Paraman**, and bearing depictions of the cross, the spear, reed and sponge, and the skull and crossbones. This garment is worn around the neck and reaches to the ankles; it is the mystical Cross which the monastic is to take up each day.

The monastic is also given a pointed hat and veil called the **Cowl** or **Kouloukion**, replacing the **Kamilavka**. On the cowl are depicted five crosses, one on the forehead, two on the back, and one each on the wings of the veil. Like the anavalos, it is made of the skin of a dead animal, signifying deadness to the things of the world.

These garments are laid on the Holy Table the night before the candidate receives the Great Schema. This is a way of showing that the candidate (whose name will be changed again) is receiving the garments from the Lord Himself. The monastics of the Great Schema spend the rest of their lives in prayerful silence and seclusion in the monastery, or sometimes in a specially-prepared hermitage.

It takes several years to become a full member of a monastery. Some monastics remain **brothers** or **sisters**. Brothers can become **priests**. Some monks can become **bishops**. Others become the heads of monasteries. The head of a men's monastery is an **Abbot**, while in a women's monastery it is the **Abbess**.

Monastics live without many of the comforts most of us take for granted. They worship, live, and work together every day. They choose not to marry. They spend many hours in **prayer**, in the daily cycle of services of the **monastery church**, as well as in private prayer. They use the rest of their time working to help support the monastery, some at jobs like gardening and cooking. Others clean the church, monastery and grounds. Some take care of the services. Still others work at the jobs which help financially support the monastery, like baking goods to sell, making jams and honey, writing and binding books. Some monastics undertake scientific research or concentrate on serving the poor, or training special dogs!

Monastics are loving people, whose main wish is to pray for the world, and to provide hospitality to those who seek it. Monasteries are not only places where the nuns or monks live together. Many of them are also places for people to visit and refresh their spiritual lives. Monastics help people achieve this by opening their monasteries to them, providing spiritual guidance, and allowing them to be moved by the presence of God. No matter where we are in our lives, monastics are always praying for us.