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Ascetical Images in St Bede's Commentary on the Temple

Fr Kristian Akselberg

Our entry into Great Lent is, in a sense, a return to the Old Testament. On weekdays, the daily readings from the Gospels and Epistles are replaced by readings from the Law, Prophets and Writings, and the assigned *kathismata* from the Psalter are doubled. Instead of celebrating the Holy Anaphora, Presanctified Gifts are distributed like manna to a parched and weary people. Great Lent brings us back to a state of preparation and anticipation; anticipation of the fulfilment of all the prophetic words and acts that foretold the death and resurrection of the Lamb of God, our passover from death to life, the end of the separation between God and man, the moment when the Word of God himself "became flesh and tabernacled among us"[1] and "the veil of the temple was rent in twain".[2]

In his commentary *On the Temple*,[3] St Bede exhorts us to study the Old Testament, declaring that "to secure the hope of heavenly goods we must…contemplate the consolation of the scriptures". He presents us with "the little work that I had…written in the allegorical style on the construction of the Temple of God", and adds that, "if you read it attentively, then the more you find the mysteries of Christ and the

[1] John 1:14
[2] Matthew 27:51
[3] *Bede: On the Temple*, trans. Seán Connolly (Liverpool: University Press, 1995).

Church contained in its ancient passages",[4] many of which present us with ascetical images pertinent to the Lenten season.

St Bede begins his commentary by pointing out how Solomon sought the help of the gentile Hiram, king of Tyre, to help him build the Temple. Although the primary symbolism of this was that "when the Lord came in the flesh…the [members] Church [would come] not from the Jews alone but also from the gentiles",[5] he also notes how the skills and abilities of the gentile workers "converted to true wisdom" were repurposed and redirected to holy ends.[6] This notion is central to Christian asceticism, for as the Fathers teach, the passions are but misdirected virtues, and freedom from the passions consists not in their destruction but their redirection towards their corresponding virtue.

The Scriptures tell us that these workers were "quarrying at the mountain" so that "the house, when it was built, was built with unworked quarried stones. Hammer, axe, and all steel objects were not heard at the house".[7] St Bede relates this to the necessity of spiritual struggle in this life, for no such struggle can take place in the next.

"No hammer, axe or any iron implement is heard because here below we are hammered by adversities and trained by the teaching of truth so

[4] Ibid., 3.
[5] Ibid., 7–8.
[6] Ibid.
[7] 3 Kingdoms 5:15, 6:12.

that there we may be ranged in appropriate places according to our deserts and so that when our purification is over we may be filled with the one Spirit and bathed in the glue of love to bind us to each other."[8]

Specifically, St Bede sees in the fact that the stones were hewn on another mountain and then taken to the mountain of the Lord a symbol of how "all of us human beings were born on the mountain of pride because we take our carnal origins from the first human being's prevarication which pride was the cause of". He continues:

But those of us preordained to life *by God's grace, who were hewn by being catechized and by receiving the mysteries of the faith, were transferred from the mountain of pride to the mountain of the house of the Lord, and, rescued from the power of darkness, we reached the citadel of virtues, which is the unity of the Holy Church.*[9]

Elsewhere he says that the "stones must be hewn from the mountain because those whom we seek to train in the true faith we must first teach to renounce the devil and escape, by being reborn, from the fate of the first transgression in which they were born".[10] We should remember that the Scriptural basis for the Lenten period is the forty days[11] Jesus spent

[8] *On the Temple*, 28.
[9] Ibid., 11–12.
[10] Ibid., 16.
[11] Commenting on the dimensions of the Temple — its length being forty cubits — St Bede gives an extensive explanation of the symbolic significance of the number forty (Ibid., 38–40).

in the wilderness being tempted by the devil,[12] and that Lent is traditionally the period during which catechumens prepared themselves for baptism, not only through religious instruction, but fasting, prayer and frequent exorcisms.[13] In this respect, Lent takes us back not only to the anticipation of the Old Testament, but is an invitation for us to renew the spiritual foundation that was laid for us in holy baptism.

It is fitting, says St Bede, that this foundation is made up of squared stones. "For whatever is squared is accustomed to fit no matter which way it is turned. To this figure is likened the hearts of the elect which have learnt to stand firm in the faith so that no adverse occurrence, not even death itself, can make them deviate from their way of uprightness".[14]

However, a foundation is just that. Something must be built upon it for it to have any purpose:

After the foundation which is made up of stones of such quality and size, the house must be built with wood and stones…because, after the first rudiments of the faith and after the foundation of humility have been laid in us…there remains to continue upwards the wall of good works, superimposing on each other, as it were, courses of stones by the life we lead and by advancing from virtue to virtue.[15]

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[12] Matthew 4
[13] See, for example, Cyril of Jerusalem's 4th century *Procatechesis* (9) and *Catechetical Lectures* (1.5).
[14] *On the Temple,* 15.
[15] Ibid., 16.

We often make the mistake of having a negative view of salvation, where being saved simply means to escape hell. Similarly, we have a negative view of ascesis, where our only goal is to struggle against sinful behaviour and inclinations. But this movement away from sin is merely the foundation of a process that is thoroughly positive. God creates us in his image that we may eventually attain his likeness,[16] that we through our union with Christ can become "partakers of the divine nature"[17] and share with him the glory that he had with the Father "before the world was."[18] Again, our ascetic struggle is not merely a struggle against the passions, but a struggle to attain virtue. Thus, "no stone at all could be seen" in the Temple, but all was covered with cedar and gold, denoting the various virtues of Christian life.[19]

The greatest virtue is love, as the Apostle tells us.[20] We can see this represented by the two great cherubim adorning the middle of the inner sanctuary.[21] Each cherub was made of olive wood, a sign of mercy,[22] measured ten cubits high, a sign of the attainment of God's likeness through the perfect fulfilment of the commandments,[23] and was covered

[16] Genesis 1:26
[17] 2 Peter 1:4
[18] John 17:5, 22.
[19] *On the Temple,* 41, 52–53.
[20] 1 Cor. 13:13
[21] 3 Kingdoms 6:22
[22] *On the Temple,* 50.
[23] Ibid., 47

in gold, signifying the glory of God[24] of which we are called to become partakers. But "two cherubim were made in order to signify a sharing in the same love…because love cannot exist between fewer than two."[25]

That our ascesis must be outward-looking and find its fulfilment in love is also represented by the way in which Solomon arranged his workmen: "They were changed a month in Lebanon and two months at their home".[26] St Bede explains that:

The three months, the term allotted to each of the lumbermen, represent figuratively the perfection of the three evangelical virtues, namely, almsgiving, prayer and fasting…almsgiving [puts] the love of God into practice; prayer compromises everything that joins us to the creator by interior compunction, and fasting every means we use to keep ourselves from the contagion of vices and from the allurements of the world so that we can always give ourselves with freedom of spirit and chastity of body to the love both of our creator and our neighbour.[27]

The one month abroad thus represents our outward movement of love, while the two months at home represent our inner struggle for the purification of the heart,[28] which for St Bede is symbolised by the Temple's slanted windows, which were wider on the inside than on the outside, because "whosoever receives a ray of heavenly contemplation

[24] Ibid., 49.
[25] Ibid., 48.
[26] 3 Kingdoms 5:14
[27] *On the Temple,* 10.
[28] Ibid., 11.

even for a moment must expand the bosom of his heart more fully by mortification and prepare it by resourceful asceticism to strive for greater things."[29]

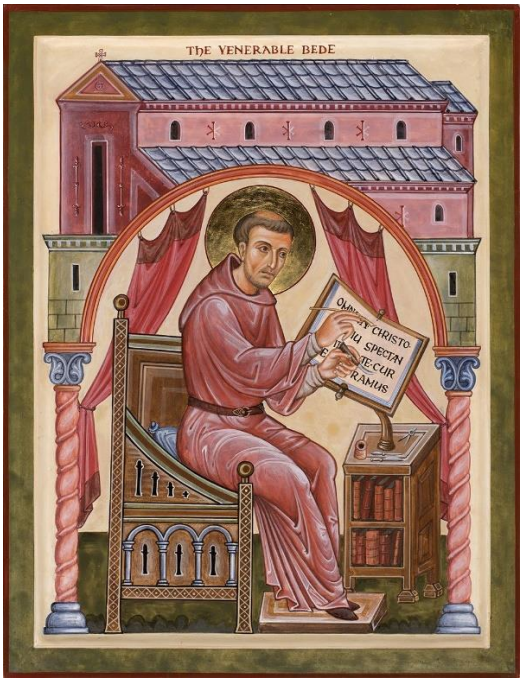
This striving for greater things is, of course, not something we can undertake alone by mere human effort. That the Temple had "side chambers all round" denotes "the divine protection which helps us not to give up while still struggling in this world and daily striving after higher things according to our capacity."[30]

However, this divine protection during our ascetic struggle is afforded to us only within the Church of Christ. "Each floor," says St Bede, "had sides all round it…in case anyone standing or sitting on these floors should fall [as] happened to king Ahaziah [...] who had separated himself from the house of David." The king "did indeed go up to the upper-room, but he fell through the railings because, although heretics or schismatics seem to scale some peak of good work, nevertheless, because they lack the structure of the Church's unity, the protecting side-walls are, as it were, gaping open and weak."[31]

In other words, ascesis is not merely an endeavour towards moral improvement, but is man's cooperation with divine grace in order to attain to the similitude of and union with Jesus Christ. For the Temple

[29] Ibid., 25.
[30] Ibid., 33.
[31] Ibid., 27.

of God, as St Bede notes, was built in the place of peace[32] by the king of peace[33], and "was made as a figure of the holy Catholic Church which, from the first of the elect to the last to be born at the end of the world, is daily being built through the grace of the king of peace, namely, its redeemer."[34] Ascetic life is precisely this: the daily building of the house of God in the Jerusalem of man's heart.



The Venerable Bede, Aidan Hart

[32] Ibid., 21
[33] Ibid., 7.
[34] Ibid., 5.

Seeking the Desert in Celtic Britain

Christine Matheson

Anthony the Great who moved to the desert in 270–271 A.D. became known as both the Father and Founder of desert monasticism. By the time of his death in 356 A.D., thousands of monks and nuns had been drawn to living in the desert following Anthony's example leading his biographer, Athanasius of Alexandria, to write that "*the desert had become a city.*" The Desert Fathers had a major influence on the development of Christianity and the monks of Ireland and Scotland looked on Saint Antony as their ideal and their prototype. After Jesus and the Virgin Mary, he was the most commonly sculpted figure in Scotland and Ireland.

John Cassian (c. 360 A.D– c. 435 A.D.), brought the ideas and practices of Eastern Christian monasticism to the early medieval west. He had lived in the desert of Scetis, which he described as the place of perfection [35] and in his book, *The Conferences, he* summarizes the important conversations that he had with elders he met at Scetis about the spiritual and ascetic life. He established an Egyptian-style monastic community in Gaul - the Abbey of Saint Victor at Marseilles. From there, this Egyptian model spread throughout Gaul and was

[35]Matta, Y. (2020). John Cassian as a Bridge between East and West: The West Perception of the Early Eastern Monastic Tradition. East-West Dialogue: Individual and Society through Ages: Proceedings of the International Interdisciplinary and Transdisciplinary Conference "East-West - Multitopic - Dialogue, Second Edition", Hyperion University of Bucharest, June 7th 2019.

transplanted into Celtic Britain by men such as Saint Ninian who had visited Tours and brought it to Whithorn in Galloway then to Moville in Ireland where Saint Columba studied. The second originated at Lérins, an important centre of literary work and famous school of theology and was taken to Ireland by Saint Patrick.[36] Coptic monasticism readily transferred itself to Ireland and Scotland particularly in the person of Saint Columba, the enlightener of the Scottish people who founded his monastery in Iona in 565 A.D.

In adhering to the spirit of desert asceticism, many Celtic monks constantly sought the equivalent of the Egyptian desert - places of extreme solitude and harsh weather where they carried out severe forms of asceticism. Evidence of these "desert places" exists today in Irish place-names which include the term 'disert' and its variations: *Disertmartin*, *Disert* and *Killadysert*. There are a number of desert/dysart placenames found throughout Scotland. For example, *Dysart* in Fife, traditionally connected with St. Serf, *Dysart* in the Parish of Maryton, in Forfarshire; and *An Diseart* near Pitlochry. The village of Dalmally at the foot of Glen Orchy was called *Clachan an Diseirt*, and the parish of Glen Orchy was sometimes called *Dysart*. There are also the place names *Cladh an Diseart* and *Port na Disert* in Iona.[37]

[36]Mullhall, Marion, 1889. St. Patrick and the Monastery of Lérins. *The Irish Monthly.* 17 (194), pp. 395-399.

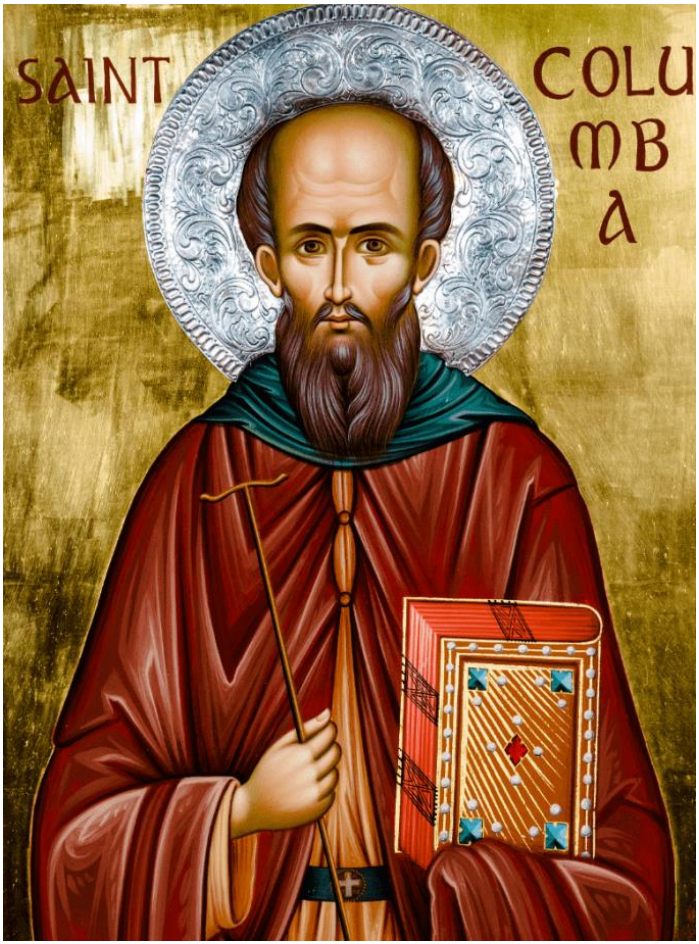
[37] "The word 'disert' is unknown in present-day Gaelic, but it was a common old Irish term when the Celtic Church flourished in Iona. Irish monasteries often had a disert nearby, consisting of one or more hermits' cells.". Trenholme, Edward, C., 1909. *The story of Iona.* Edinburgh: David Douglas.

The most determined ascetics, however, sought their desert on islands in the sea. The *Vita Sancti Columbae* by Adamnan is full of these references. The following example is typical: "*Some of our brethren have lately set sail, and are anxious to discover a desert in the sea that cannot be crossed.*"[38]

Saint Columba imposed a voluntary exile on himself and left his native Ireland, setting out in a in a coracle with twelve companions. He had no planned destination. From early Irish Law tracts we learn that an enforced exile was a form of punishment. The Irish penitentials, using the term *peregrinatio*, take a similar position, indicating that the practice was widespread in secular and ecclesiastical society by at least the seventh century. The full force of this punishment can be appreciated when it is understood how early Irish society was organised. The basic unit of society was the túath, this term applied to both the geographical district and the people. People were intimately connected to their túath by ties of kinship, to the extent that they had no legal status outwith their túath. Leaving the túath meant loss of social and legal status and loss of connection to their community. Becoming an exile meant becoming an outcast and it was considered to be a form of martyrdom-defined as bánmartre (white martyrdom) in the Cambrai Homily. [39]

[38] Adamnan's Life of Columba editedited by Anderson Alan orr and Anderson, Marjorie Ogilvie, (1961). Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson. P.441.
[39] John Marsden, 1995. *Sea -Road of the Saints: Celtic Holy Men in the Hebrides*. Edinburgh: Floris Books.

Such exiles were renouncing the world for the love of Christ, inspired by the words of Jesus to the rich young man "*...if you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me."* (Mat 19:21, NKJ). To pursue this *promise of treasure in heaven* required complete detachment from the world and a denial of self.



St Columba, Nun Paramythia

Penance in Early Medieval Ireland

Christine Matheson

Penitential literature, which originated in Ireland, is an identifying feature of the early Celtic Church. In Early Medieval Ireland, there were few large centres of population and Christian communities were organised around the monasteries. In Ireland, there was no tradition of the one-off public penance commonly used in the Continent and Irish clerics saw no problem in developing their alternative approach for dealing with the sins of repentant Christians.

The old Irish Law system viewed crime as an offence committed against a person and his family group. The offence was made good by the payment of an honour price by the guilty party or his family. The fine, which varied with the nature of the offence and status of the offender was based on reparation. Irish law saw penalties as reparations for damage done not as punishments to inflict suffering on the criminal. This system could easily be adapted for dealing with sinners in a religious context where sin is an offence against God and carries a price if the sin is to be removed.

The oldest extant penitential is attributed to Finnian of Clonnard, dated from about 525–550 AD. Finnian assumes all Christians will fall into sin after baptism, that they will not be perfect disciples but will fall short in many ways. He equally believes that there are many remedies,

many of them very tough and demanding, which can lead the Christian to their ultimate goal - holiness.

Finnian refined the work of Cassian, developing a system of confession in which the private recitation of sins was followed by the private performance of penance. This system was available to Christians outside the monastery, making it applicable to all sins and available to all sinners. Those using the penitentials were spiritual diagnosticians who had learned from the previous experience of those dealing with sick souls, to prescribe an appropriate remedy that would heal the soul and bring it back to communion with God.

The responsibility was with the sick person themselves to accept the remedy.

The fifty or more situations envisaged as requiring penance cover the whole range of sins and it is directed to the whole of society- lay, monastic, clerical, men and women. To each sin is prescribed a specific penitential remedy involving a fixed quantity of prayer, fasting and alms. The influence of the writings of John Cassian can be seen in Finnian's use of the octade- the eight principle sins[40] and of the concept of penance as a spiritual medicine curing vices by contrary virtues.

[40] In his *Conferences*, John Cassian writes about the eight deadly sins: gluttony, fornication, avarice, anger, sadness, acedia, vainglory and pride. St. John Cassian, *"The Conferences,"* (New York: Newman Press, 1997), pp. 183-196.

29..... *But by contraries, as we said, let us make haste to cure contraries and to cleanse away the faults from our hearts and introduce virtues in their places. Patience must arise for wrathfulness; kindliness, or the love of God and of one's neighbour, for envy; for detraction, restraint of heart and tongue; for dejection, spiritual joy; for greed, liberality; as saith the Scripture: "The anger of man worketh not the justice of God", and envy is judged as leprosy by the law. Detraction is anathematized in the Scriptures; "He that detracteth his brother shall be cast out of the land of the living. Gloom devours or consumes the soul. Covetousness is "the root of all evil," as saith the Apostle.* [41]

Finnian's innovative approach acknowledged sins of thought and stresses the importance of repenting of them immediately and asking for forgiveness.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.
1. *If anyone has sinned by thought in his heart and immediately repents, he shall beat his breast and seek pardon from God and make satisfaction, and (so) he is whole.*[42]

This demand, to seek forgiveness from God for sin, is a recurring theme throughout his penitential. Finnian also identifies the heart as where the offence takes place against God and he writes about the

[41] Beiler, Ludwig (ed.), 1975. *The Irish Penitentials.* Dublin: The Dublin institute for Advanced Studies.p. 85

[42] Beiler, Ludwig (ed.), 1975. *The Irish Penitentials.* Dublin: The Dublin institute for Advanced Studies. P. 75

importance of having sorrow towards God for the offence – sorrow which involves shedding tears, (see clause 29. below). Finnian differentiated between the evil act and the evil intention. A person had to have an awareness of the nature of his sinful intention and the rejection of it as part of the process of contrition. Contrition was identified as the essential first step before asking pardon from God followed by repaying for the offence with a fixed penance which was the cure which would lead to a restored and stronger Christian.

29. *If a cleric is wrathful or envious or backbiting, gloomy or greedy, great and capital sins are these; and they slay the soul and cast it down to the depth of hell. But there is this penance for them, until they are plucked forth and eradicated from our hearts: through the help of the Lord and through our own zeal and activity let us seek the mercy of the lord and victory in these things; and we shall continue in weeping and tears day and night so long as these things are turned over in our heart;.*[43]

Finnian had practical experience – he was responsible for the pastoral care of his community and he was very aware that penances had to be adapted to different circumstances. The penances prescribed by Finnian varied according to the status of the offender, the offender's intention and state of mind and with the speed of sorrow for offences.

[43] Beiler, Ludwig (ed.), 1975. *The Irish Penitentials*. Dublin: The Dublin institute for Advanced Studies. P. 85.

For example, in Finnian's penitential clerics were treated more severely than the laity for the same sin.

Finnian's penitential profoundly influenced the subsequent development of penance and was the basis of other penitentials- for example those of Columbanus and Cummean and in the English manuals of Theodore, Bede and Egbert.

The Irish penitentials were pastorally effective and helped to develop a deeper understanding of life in Christian discipleship. They had a positive approach, shifting the emphasis from punishment to healing, from sinfulness to disease, from judge to physician from the loss of baptismal holiness to becoming holy through a life of discipleship - a discipleship which entailed the detailed examination of conscience and intention and the acceptance that contrition was the essential first step in restoring the integrity of the soul and gaining God's mercy. Penance, being medicinal builds up and strengthens the Christian who has been weakened by sin.

St Finnian of Clonard, by Marchela Dimitrov

Making a Beginning: Six Rules from Fr. Seraphim Rose

Stephen Griffith

Beside my bed is a framed photograph of a priest outdoors in Pascal vestments, holding in one hand a bouquet of Easter candles, his head bent over a long, scraggly beard. The picture was taken on Bright Monday 1981. The priests' face speaks of the mixed extremes of joy and exhaustion characteristic of the day. The priest is Fr. Seraphim Rose arguably one of the most significant Orthodox figures to emerge in the English-speaking world during the last century. Born Eugene Rose in 1934 he grew up in California, USA – the centre of the cultural trends which in time would spread to the rest of the world. As a student Rose rejected the Protestant Christianity of his upbringing in favour of atheism. He then fell under the influence of the emerging 'Beat Generation' a cultural movement characterised by the rejection of established authorities, embrace of Eastern spirituality, unconventional sexual mores, and drug use. While the latter of these never interested him the others certainly did. Rose's interest in Eastern spirituality led him to investigate the Eastern Christian tradition. After visiting an Orthodox Church in San Francisco and meeting such modern luminaries of the faith as St. John Maximovitch, Rose converted to Orthodoxy in 1962. Rose gave himself to his new faith, eventually becoming a monk and a priest in the mountains of north California with the name Fr. Seraphim. He reposed in 1982.

The popular culture we live in now is very much a further perfection of the culture just emerging during Fr. Seraphim's youth. What was then a fringe counter-culture has now become the dominant mainstream. Having partaken of this emerging culture Fr. Seraphim would utterly reject it in the Light of Christ. For us who have been raised in that culture, Fr. Seraphim is a valuable voice of discernment and direction about how we can steer a safe course through the world without being enticed by its deceptions. I have picked out six principles from his works which I believe are especially helpful to us:

1. Crucify your mind.

Fr. Seraphim wrote: 'When I became Christian I voluntarily crucified my mind, and all the crosses that I bear have only been a source of joy for me. I have lost nothing, and gained everything.' (340)[44] By 'crucifying the mind' he meant that the teachings of the Orthodox faith are not for us to pick and choose from or reinterpret according to our own feelings and opinions. The wisdom of the Church is the 'mind of Christ' and must be accepted with simplicity of heart.

2. Avoid "Super Correctness"

Of course, the first principle if taken too far can lead to a fanatical 'super correctness' which while attempting to be correct to the letter of the Church canons and traditions ended up in being Pharisaic and

[44] Unless stated all quotes and page numbers are from the book *Father Seraphim Rose: His Life and Works.*

judgmental towards ones fellow Orthodox who were deemed not correct or indeed 'not *truly* Orthodox.' This phenomenon has only grown with the advent of 'internet Orthodoxy.' Such an attitude poisons a genuine Orthodox spirit. In response to this tendency Fr. Seraphim wrote: 'They have built a church career for themselves on a false but attractive premise: that the chief danger to the Church is lack of strictness. No – the chief danger is something much deeper – *the loss of the savor of Orthodoxy*, a movement in which they themselves are participating, even in their 'strictness'… 'Strictness' will not save us if we don't have any more the feeling and taste of Orthodoxy.' (530) Indeed, Fr. Seraphim once said that it is alright not always to be so 'correct' if it means we are a bit more humble.

3. Embrace Humility

Such an attitude of humility can also help us to be more patient with those who seem to be going off the deep end of 'super-correctness.' Fr. Seraphim wrote: 'A little humility in looking at ourselves would help us to be more generous and forgiving of the faults of others. We love to judge others for the strangeness of their behavior; we call them "cuckoos" or "crazy converts." It is true that we should beware of really unbalanced people who can do us great harm in the Church. But what serious Orthodox Christian today is not a little "crazy"?'[45] Such a humble acknowledgment of our own quirks and foibles should make us more easily bear with those of our brothers and sisters in faith.

[45] From *The Orthodox Word*, vol. 18, no. 4 (105), July-August 1982, pp. 160-176.

4. Try being a normal human person

Fr. Seraphim counselled that what most people need today is not exalted spiritual states (which they are most often not ready to receive) but simple training in being the kind of balanced human being who with the right attitude can make a humble beginning of the spiritual life. One must become a good human being before they can become a saint. For this task Fr. Seraphim recommended make use of the best of secular culture (good literature, good music, and good art) as a way of forming hearts. There is a story of an Elder who recommended that one of his novices read Charles Dickens novel *David Copperfield*. The novice was shocked: 'This isn't spiritual; it's not even Orthodox! I need writings that will teach me spirituality!' The Elder responded: 'Unless you first develop normal, human, Christian feelings and learn to view life as little Davy did – with simplicity, kindness, warmth, and forgiveness – then all the Orthodox spiritual writings will be of little or no benefit to you.'

5. Struggle!

The task of becoming simply 'normal' entails serious struggle: 'We,' Fr. Seraphim wrote '…are far from the normal life of Orthodox piety; how much therefore, must we struggle in order to get back to that normal life! But how inspiring is the path to it!' (482) However, for Fr. Seraphim this struggle was precisely what made the spiritual life real – bearing real spiritual fruit and real wisdom.

6. Look up

So how can this be done amid the normal distractions not only of the world but even those of unedifying church politics and gossip which especially can have the power to dishearten souls and leave people feeling burnt-out. Fr. Seraphim taught people in such circumstances to 'look up!' – do not be disheartened and distracted by what is going on down here but look up to Christ Who said 'In the world ye shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer: I have overcome the world.' (John 16:33).

Through these six rules are two constant themes: first, less head and more heart; second, an openness to the transformational power of Christ. May Fr. Seraphim's words help us to make a beginning.

Fr Seraphim Rose, Bright Monday, 1981

Orthodox Ascesis and Family Life

Elissabeth Kakalis[46]

Since the ancient times until now, the core and foundation of the society has been the marriage of a man and a woman, consisting of a family, the body-soul union of whom might be also blessed by God with children. Family is structured upon to love between its members. The father, the mother and their children are called to positively contribute to the development of the society, depending on specific conditions that allow the family to become a beacon of a dynamic, creative, generative and fruitful direction for the society.

In the Orthodox Christian culture the family based on the loving co-existence of its members dwells in the peace of God, seeking to walk along the path of acquiring virtues by following His commandments. God dictates in the Gospel the steps that have to be made in order for every day of ascetic endeavour to lead the parents and the children towards the true life, that is our Lord Jesus Christ. The main factor for them to walk along this path is the constant agonistic seeking for virtue, through selflessness, humility, patience and love in an ethos of consistency, responsibility and dignity. The mutual love between the father and the mother, armored by the sacrificial understanding of Christ-centred co-existence, is the necessary condition for the salvational direction of the family.

[46] Mother of three children, grandmother of two grandchildren and a retired lawyer.

Parents consciously committed to ascesis, surpass their egos and transform their life into working on obedience to God's Will. This journey grants them the kind of love that can shed light to a blessed upbringing of their children. This kind of love is powered by the hope that our living God constantly takes care for the family in the context of His fatherhood.

> The love of husband and wife is the force that welds society together. Men will take up arms and even sacrifice their lives for the sake of this love. When harmony prevails, the children are raised well, the household is kept in order, and neighbors, friends, and relatives praise the result. Great benefits, both for families and states are thus produced.
> [St John Chrysostom, Homilies on Marriage and Family Life]

Our homes, St John Chrysostom suggests, should become arenas of acquiring God's virtue. In this stadium we are exercising ourselves spiritually every single moment, for our virtues to be well rooted in us and start giving fruit with God's help and grace. And our ascesis on surpassing our egos is gradually embodied by us, and growing, and

becoming lighter, giving us joy. We, as parents, should be aware that we are not only responsible for our salvation, but also for the salvation of our children, and those under our care; salvation is not a personal matter; it is a collective responsibility towards God's Love. This kind of ascetic life sometimes feels like a restful walk, and other times like a difficult and painful climbing on a mountain; it does not depend only on our intentions and choices, but also on the condition, efforts and choices of the ones around us.

> I have taken you in my arms, and I love you, and I prefer you to my life itself. For the present life is nothing, and my most ardent dream is to spend it with you in such a way that we may be assured of not being separated in the life reserved for us. I place your love above all things, and nothing would be more bitter or painful to me than to be of a different mind than you.
> [St John Chrysostom, Homilies on Marriage and Family Life]

Today we all have a job and get tired, men and women; others in order to make their living and others also for the fulfilment of their dreams; both of these reasons are good, and our jobs should be seen as gifts

from God, as one talent given to us to practice it for the spiritual benefit of us and others. Unfortunately, in a lot of cases the result is that when we return back home from work, we find our patience and understanding almost exhausted. There is not even a sweet and kind word for our spouse left in us (that he/she also comes back home in a similar condition), not even a sweet word for our children. We bring back to our family all the daily cares and temptations, sometimes the feeling of injustice at work, our disappointment and a lot of problems that entail the danger of leading to despair if we are not careful (*nepsis*). We forget the surpassing of our egos, and often arguments become part of our home life, smashing the peace and love down. A sense of fear fills in the atmosphere, our home's ark is being attacked by problems outside of it; outside of our loving ones, our family. This is where humility is needed to be practiced. Humility will lead to forgiveness (asking and giving) and prayer; asking for the grace and the mercy of God to protect the works that we have managed to form with His help and blessing. It is true that when we started working on forming our family in faith in God's help, we could have never imagined how much ascesis and agonistic endeavour is entailed in our choice to faithfully commit to family. Ascesis cultivates inside of us and outside of us strength and perseverance in hope for the love that is obtained through a shared Christ-Resurrectional perspective, that always needs to be re-formed every time it is endangered by egotistic temptations. The way is one: to keep seeking how to create an image of Paradise in our homes, and as beautiful as this sounds and is, it has to

be about a single-minded decision of practising mutual selflessness between the couple, and between them and their children. This is the only way for our homes to become Churches: through ascesis again and again, as the mutual arena of shared Christ-centred love.

Suggested readings by the author:

- Regular reading of the *Scriptures* by the family
- St John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Marriage and Family Life*, (SVS Press, 1986)
-John Meyendorff, *Marriage: An Orthodox Perspective*, (SVS Press, 1997).
-Archimandrite Antonios Romaios, *Learning on the Cross*, (En Plo Editions, 2016), In Greek.
-Metropolitan of Preveza Meletios Kalamaras, *The relationship between husband and wife*, (Ionas, 2018).

The Trinity, Andrei Rublev, 15th c.

Encounters with the Sinai Desert

Fr Symeon Menne

In 1987, my mother discovered St Catherine's Monastery after a trip to Israel and soon after, my twin brother Jan and I followed her to this holy place. In these majestic, God-trodden mountains of Sinai, we were exposed for the first time to Orthodoxy – by chance some people would conventionally think, although I know all too well that God never leaves anything to chance. It was a surreal, indescribable experience, one that is indelibly stamped in my soul. On our first encounter, we were stunned by its peacefulness, and the overwhelming feeling of God's presence throughout. The place felt also detached by modernisation with very little electricity that was made available from a generator, which would run for few hours in the evening. At night, the skies were just a revelation of God's glorious creation as there was no light pollution from anywhere and no modern distractions. Even getting there was not straightforward at that time; one had to board a rather smashed up bus from Cairo at 6 o'clock in the morning, which took 7-8 hours to get to the village close to the monastery travelling though windy roads many of which were not yet asphalted.

The monastery is situated around 1500m above sea level in a narrow valley surrounded by rocks of granite with very little vegetation just north of Mount Moses, where Moses received the 10 commandments. In the 4th century, St Helena ordered the building of a chapel on the roots

of the Burning Bush, where God appeared to Moses and revealed himself: "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God Of Isaac and the God of Jacob …." concluding with the famous saying " I am who I am" (Exodus 3:6,14). At the time, there were many hermits living in caves in the surrounding mountains but no permanent structures had been established and so the Chapel of the Burning Bush became a central fixture for all hermits and families living in the area. In the 6th century St Justinian ordered the building of the monastery, which is approximately 70 x 70m in size surrounded by very thick and high walls constructed by granite from the local mountains. It encloses the chapel of the Burning Bush, Moses well, where Moses met his future wife, Zipporah, a new church building just in front of the Chapel of the Burning with its famous 6th century Transfiguration fresco as well as refectories, storage spaces, and the monks enclosures. The monastery was initially dedicated to the Feast of Transfiguration as Moses and Elijah had both received revelations close to it – Moses as already mentioned, and Elijah in a cave just below Mount Moses (1King 19: 8-14) – a cave, which still exist and has a small chapel dedicated to Elijah built over it.

Captivated by the awe-inspiring holiness of this place, we would return to it 1-2 times per year. We were all inspired by the monks of St Catherine monastery under the leadership of Archbishop Damianos, the late Archimandrites Father Adrianos, who lived as a hermit in the skete of St Epistime and St Galaction since the 1970s and Father Paul, the late

Father Michael, Father Arsenios, as well as Father Justin in later years as well as many others. We stayed in the youth hostel belonging to the monastery just outside and gradually started to get more and more drawn into the services, starting every morning at 4 am with Orthros and Divine Liturgy, the Hours at lunchtime and then Vespers in the evening. Afterward, we would frequently walk up Mount Moses or Elijah valley with a camper mat and sleeping bag and sleep in the mountains on the granite rocks under the stars; we would then get up at 3:00am to be back at the Monastery for the opening of the doors to go to service. During the daytime, we would explore the surrounding mountains, remote non-active skites, caves such as St Climacus cave, chapels, such as place where the relics of St Catherine were discovered on Mount St Catherine at 2629m in the 8th century. It was this continuous searching and engrossing in the spiritual life, which kindled our thirst to delve further into the roots of Christianity and ultimately 4 years later in 1991, nearly 33 years ago, we were all baptised in a converted oil barrel just beside the chapel of the Burning Bush inside the monastery.

My Godfather Stammatis (now monk Moses at St Catherine monastery) advised me to visit the Monastery of St John the Baptist in Essex, which became my second spiritual home after 1994 when I moved to the UK and where the late Archimandrite Father Symeon, of blessed memory, surrounded me with his loving and wise spiritual counsel. Meanwhile, my other Godfather Hieromonk Arsenios always told me that after baptism I should not evangelise or proselytize but stay silent for at least

10 years and contemplate the orthodox faith and only speak if someone asks – certainly wise words.

St Catherine monastery is not only the longest continuously inhabited Christian monastery in the world, but also hosts some of the most important Christian libraries of old documents including the Codex Sinaiticus. In addition, as it was so remote, the iconoclastic period had very limited impact on it, thus it has retained one of the greatest collection of encaustic icons in the world; perhaps the most famous is the Christ Pantocrator icon from the 6th century, with the right side of Christ depicting the qualities of the divinity, while the left side represents his human nature. I can still remember the time before large crowds of pilgrims would start arriving at the Monastery, when several of these icons were displayed in the main church narthex behind simple glass vitrines; everyone was able to venerate those beloved icons and how often I would stand in front of the Pantocrator icon for minutes contemplating our Creator and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Alas, over the last years many changes have taken place; roads have been built, the monastery is now fully electrified, and the Egyptian Government has significantly expanded the local village, which lies approximately 2 km from the monastery with the aim of increasing tourism. Police forces are now controlling passages and it is not possible to roam around remote places without some form of guide. Nevertheless, if one takes time and overcomes the initial temptations

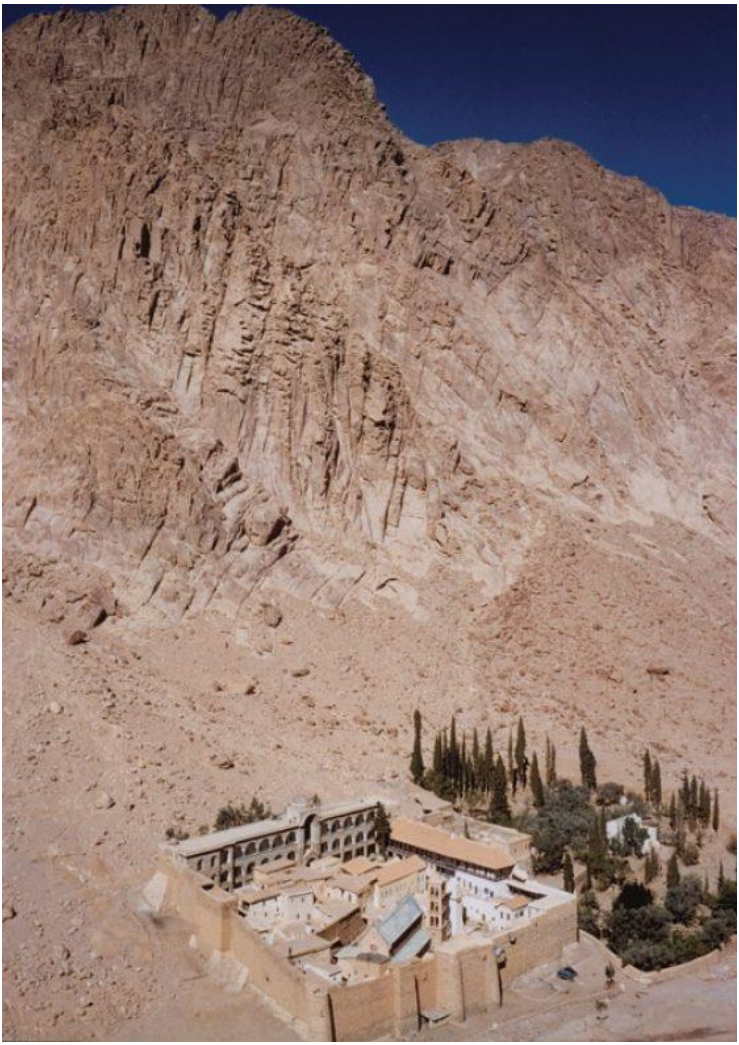
posed by the changes implemented, one still feels the blessing of the place and the continuous monastic life.

More than 170 Sinaite Saints are honoured by our Church including St Catherine, St Gregory of Sinai who transmitted the hesychast tradition to the Slavic people, and St John Climacus, who lived in the 6-7th c.; the latter was as a hermit living in a cave close to the Monastery of the Burning Bush, where he eventually became the Abbot. It was during the earlier part of his life when he wrote 'The Ladder of Divine Ascent' – one of the most read books of Orthodox spirituality. In it he depicts the continuous struggle to achieve spiritual perfection as 30 steps we need to try to ascend in remembrance of the age of Christ at His baptism. Several of them are clearly aimed at monastic tradition. Nevertheless, as we prepare for the events of the Holy Week, it is very appropriate to reflect on the life we are called to follow and this is why the Church in its wisdom dedicated the last two Sundays of Lent to two great ascetic Saints, namely St John Climacus and St Mary of Egypt.

His book starts with chapters on general virtues, including rejection of worldliness, repentance, obedience, followed by steps about overcoming vices with corresponding virtues. St John then describes several very advanced steps on humility, discernment, holy stillness of body and soul, holy prayer, dispassion and perfection. The ultimate step to reach is altruistic love (agape), faith and hope, which really represents the state of divinization. To achieve this saintly state, we are reminded

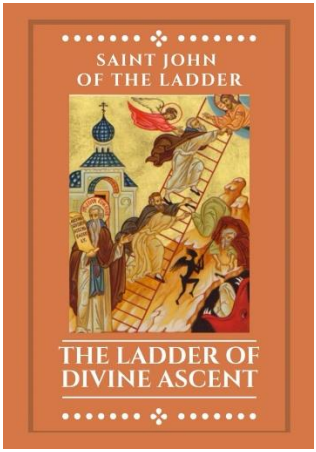
throughout of the need to continuously fight against our own vices and replace them with virtues in preparation for the Second Coming. The Lenten period serves this essential purpose of cleansing and purification by God's Grace every year to reinvigorate our zeal for Christ by regular fasting and daily praying, hence in many monasteries the tradition is to read 'The Ladder of Divine Ascent' during Great Lent in trapeza.

It is throughout the year though that we are called to challenge ourselves and take up our own cross. We ought to start climbing up this spiritual ladder of divine ascent and aim to reach the higher steps with agape as the highest goal. Along this spiritual path, we are asked to help each other, regardless of whether we live in a monastery or in the world. Fasting and prayer are one of the main cornerstones to help us with this; and when we fall - and we will - we need to repent and start again by acknowledging like the father "I believe, help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24). It is this continuous unseen warfare, which prepares us and brings us closer to Christ, so that we can hopefully be present with all the Saints in the 'New Jerusalem', the city of peace and love, the city of GOD!

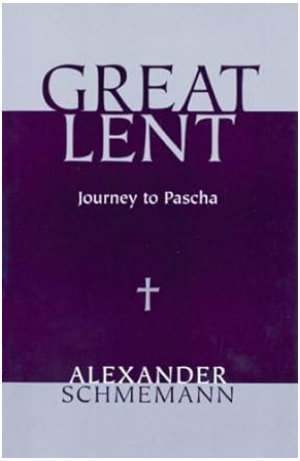


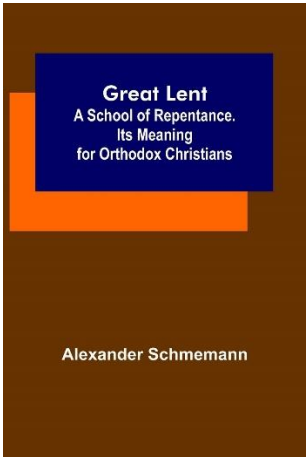
The Monastery of St Catherine, Sinai

Suggested Readings for the Lenten Period:



St. John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Translated by Archimandrite Lazarus Moore.





Alexander Schmemann, *Great Lent: Journey to Pascha* & Alexander Schmemann, *Great Lent. A School of Repentance. Its Meaning for Orthodox Christians.*

Please note that you can find St John Climacus's The Ladder of Divine Ascent in our Audio Orthodox Lectern: Audio Orthodox Lectern – St Andrew's Orthodox Church (edinburgh-orthodox.org.uk)