

Orthodox Woman, Monastic Life and the New Europe*

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We are gathered to meditate on the role of the Orthodox woman in Europe. I personally was asked by His Eminence to contribute some reflections on the place of the Orthodox nun in the Europe of today, with particular reference to Western Europe.

The first thing I have to do is confess to a certain misgiving about the question: »What contribution does Orthodox women's monasticism offer to the formation of the new Europe?« The first reason for my hesitation stems from the nature of a vocation to monasticism. Among the motivations which may inspire this step we find no trace of search for a »role in society«. The nun goes as far as to forget society, to become an exile from the world, to renounce civil responsibilities (and without reluctance or guilt). This is, of course, especially true of the beginning of monastic life. Later on there may be a »call within a call«, to become actively involved in society, in mission, in teaching. St. Cosmas of Aitolia is a fine example of this. But, »the beginning« in monastic life may last decades. Archimandrite Sophrony says that the grace of repentance is the essence of monastic vocation, and that it simply does not allow for another path in the life of those it touches. A nun is, in his words, »possessed by one single longing«.¹ This preoccupation varies in its intensity; to some extent it is of course shared by all seekers after Truth, but centuries of experience show that in some people it becomes so ardent that, in the words of St. John Chrysostom, »the Heavenly fire, ignited in the hearts of people, enkindled in them a new life, and their thought, thus freed, began to feel the *necessity* and the strength to leap up from earthly things to those on high«². This concentration on one's own salvation is common to all who enter the monastery, whatever degree of grace inspired their coming. For some, even Christians, and even theologians, this »self-centredness« is incomprehensible as a really Christian reality; it is seen as a deviation from the idea of Christian communion-in-love.³ No wonder that the Lord said, speaking about »the eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven«, »All [men] cannot receive this saying, save [they] to whom it is given«.⁴ A woman does not enter the convent to serve society more adequately: either she enters with such deep, grace-given compulsion to satisfy her

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¹ Archimandrite Sophrony, *We Shall See Him as He is*, Essex 1987, p. 52.

² John Chrysostom, In *Matthaeum Homilia* 68, 5: PG 58, 647 f.

³ Not only is there no inherent contradiction between individual repentance and love for all humanity; in fact the two are organically linked. The deeper the self-condemnation of repentance, the deeper the compassion for one's fellow men who are likewise tyrannised by sin and in need of salvation. My prayer for myself extends to include all Adam. If repentance brings a humble awareness that »I am the worst of men«, then if even I am saved, all others must be saved too.

⁴ Mt 19,11.

longing to abide in God that there is no space for considerations about »society«; or else she knows with a deep conviction that all she could offer to her fellow-man in her present state is tainted with sin and in need of purification before it could ever be a positive input. This attitude of hers does not contain any criticism of those who do work in society. She does not blame them for not waiting until they are perfect to try and improve society. But nonetheless, her experience, which may be simply incomprehensible to those who have not shared it, brings her to renounce her own part in this process.

If we turn now to the *fruits* of faithful monastic life, there too we find a reality which does not point to a particular role for the nun in any socio-political sense. Any genuine Christian spiritual experience will, however much its beginnings are centred on the individual, develop in the direction of universal, Christ-like love. Indeed, as St. John clearly states in his epistle, this is the criterion of genuine Christian experience. For the monk or nun, the first expression of this love is prayer. Here are some words of St. Silouan the Athonite on this subject:

»There are people who say that monks ought to be of some use in the world, and not eat bread they have not toiled for; but we have to understand the nature of a monk's service and the way in which he has to help the world. A monk is someone who prays for the whole world, who weeps for the whole world; and in this lies his main work.«⁵

So the primary offering to humanity of a fulfilled nun is her role as intercessor. But what we must remember in the context of this discussion is that she intercedes not merely for her own country or the political unit in which she happens to live; her love and prayer extend to the whole of mankind from Adam onwards, even to those who are not yet born. This is not an imaginative activity on the part of the nun; Saint Silouan says that such prayer implies the shedding of one's blood. This prayer is surely a major contribution to the well-being of Europe, but not only of Europe, and therefore it is difficult to speak of it specifically as a »role in European society«.

Before I address the question more positively, I hope you will have the patience to hear my final problem with the question, »What is the role of the Orthodox nun in Europe?« In speaking of monastic life up to now, I have used the terms »monk« and »nun« interchangeably. In Orthodox monastic life, the life of the nuns is indeed identical with that of monks. (I am speaking here without reference to the secondary fact that some of the monks may be ordained to the sacramental priesthood; I speak of the monk qua monk.) It is important in a climate, where there is much confusion about the roles of women, to speak as clearly, and above all as theologically, as possible about the question of specific gender roles. In monastic life as such none of the activities are gender-specific. There is no »marriage or giving in marriage«, or in other words, nothing with sexual motivation. This is not said in order to denigrate sexual function⁶; it is simply a fact, recognized by Christianity, that in some people's lives, »chastity shows itself to be a profound necessity of the spirit«.⁷ Celibacy does not de-humanise either men or women; the example of

⁵ Archimandrite Sophrony, Saint Silouan the Athonite, Essex 1991, p. 407–408.

⁶ Scripture itself (1 Tim 4,3) and the Canons (e.g. 9 and 10 of the Council of Gangra) forbid any such denigration.

⁷ Archimandrite Sophrony, Principles of Orthodox Asceticism, in: The Orthodox Ethos, Oxford 1964, p. 280.

Christ is enough to prove that. Nor does it suggest that monastic life leads to a kind of »unisex« culture in the perverted sense, the sub- or antinatural sense that we can see in the world today. No, monks remain men and nuns remain women. Perhaps you will allow me a theological/anthropological reflection on this point, even though it must be too brief to do the subject justice. Monastic life, by its renunciation of sexual activity, even of blessed conjugal relations and parenthood, allows for a total devotion to what is truly personal or hypostatic. We can attribute gender to the category of *nature*; it is not a characteristic unique to each *hypostasis*; it is a »common factor«. This is an important point, especially if we wish to understand without error the fact that the Lord, while He is a man and not a woman, embraces in His humanity all of human nature, both male and female. As Panayotis Nellas says: »The Lord not only brought human nature back to its pre-fallen state, but also rendered it complete. Adam's goal was to 'shake off' the division into male and female 'from the whole of nature through a relationship with divine virtue utterly free from passion' (St. Maximos⁸). This was brought to pass by the Lord: He realized and manifested the true essence (logos) of human nature, free from the characteristics of male and female at its deepest and most unified level, which is common to both sexes«⁹. This »deepest and most unified level« of human existence is what is called the hypostasis or person. Each person is called to live in his or her own being the fulness of human nature, and not merely to shine in the characteristics of one part of human nature. And it is at this level that the monk or nun tries to live. We could even define Christian ascetic struggle as the struggle of the hypostasis to emerge, and in so doing to restore the truly natural. This ascetic effort is of course the calling of all in the Church, not only of monks or nuns. The point I am making here is that in monastic life all the effort, even down to the everyday details of life, is organised in pursuit of this ultimate goal. Monasticism is a radically eschatological form of estrangement from the ways of fallen nature. Its »angelism« is not inhuman, as we see from the example of the man Jesus Christ, and from His words about the humans in the kingdom of God. »For in the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels of God in heaven« (Mt 22,30). All this means that we are, in my opinion, misguided if we try to indicate a particularly female form of monasticism, or a contribution to humanity which could be attributed to nuns and could not be attributed to monks. Nuns begin as women in the state of fall, with perhaps different »imbalances« from those of men, but if they develop as nuns, in the end all the imbalances which we find in unhealed men and women will have been healed. It is important not to confuse temporary, fallen gender characteristics (even those which are more positive in their manifestation) with the characteristics of a sanctified human person who lives out healed human nature. Of course, the process of sanctification does not take place either automatically with the donning of a habit, nor immediately. This means that in convent life there will be psychological elements which are manifestations of the particularities of women in the fallen state. We could say that in the beginning of the monastic life, or in the confessions of the nuns, there are specifically female elements. Some »female« characteristics may even be usefully exploited in the

⁸ *Maximos the Confessor*, Ambigua: PG 91, 1341C.

⁹ *P. Nellas*, *Deification in Christ*, Crestwood 1987, p. 81.

process of spiritual development¹⁰. But in sanctified human persons, the difference between men and women remains, on earth, almost totally limited to the physical. So, if we have difficulty speaking about a »monastic role in Europe«, we have an added difficulty trying to define a specific contribution of nuns.

The presence of Orthodox women monastics in Europe does indeed, in spite of my hesitations on this matter, offer something to society as well as the gift of prayer. Although, as I have wished to emphasise, a monk or nun would never set out for the monastery *in order to* counteract any negative currents of worldly society, by their very existence monasteries prove that an alternative exists. Perhaps it is not appropriate for a nun to, as it were, »boast« of this. Be assured that my observations on this subject are based on another viewpoint, looking at monasticism as it were from outside. What is the connection between the monastery and »the world« which the monks and nuns have renounced? Father Georges Florovsky writes: »A monastery is, in a sense, an '*extraterrestrial colony*' in this world of vanity«¹¹. He goes on to say: »The empire [...] was very anxious to domesticate monasticism, to reintegrate it into the general and political social order. Success was partial, and led to a decay. [...] Monasteries always remain, in a sense, heterogeneous inclusions, and are never fully integrated into the imperial order of life.« This is not because of a deliberate and conscious effort on the part of monks to exhibit a »less worldly« form of Christianity. I repeat that no such ambition is inherent to a monastic calling. I cannot agree with Fr. Florovsky's idea (widely shared by church historians) that »monasticism was an attempt to escape the building up of a Christian empire«. I think that the rise of monasticism in the 3rd and 4th centuries was due, in the eyes of the monks at least, rather to the presence, example, and guidance of certain holy persons (such as St. Anthony the Great) than to any overt aim on the part of monks or nuns of reminding the church that it is in the world but not of the world. This reminder was indeed perhaps more necessary when the Roman persecutions ended, but if it came from monasticism it was because *others* saw monasticism as »the descent to earth of the angelic world, as the attainment and realisation in history of what by its very essence lies beyond the confines of history«¹². The presence of monasteries in the Europe of today can, *de facto*, have the same effect. For some, the monastery provides an instance of life less dependent on material possessions; for others, of life arranged more ecologically than is often the case – this is not only because, in order to be as self-sufficient as possi-

¹⁰ Spiritual fathers and saints acknowledge that there are particularly feminine characteristics which can be spiritually useful even *during* the journey from the state of beginners to the final perfection of integrity. Take the following text of St. John Chrysostom as an example of this: »In the beginning of Christianity, in the land of Egypt there appeared a wonderful army of Christ, leading to a form of life natural only to the celestial powers. It was made up not only of men, but also of women, who no less than men led contemplative life. As great ascetics they entered into spiritual warfare with the devil and the powers of darkness, and their physical weakness was not at all a hindrance. If they did not possess a fortress of strength, then, as if in place of it, they were endowed with a more living feeling and sensitivity« (Quoted in »Letters to a beginner« by *Abbess Thaisia*, p. 30–31). Staretz Paisios also said that nuns wept more easily than monks, and that this could be exploited spiritually. Such texts, though, must not blind us to the fact that a spiritually mature monk weeps no less, and no less effectively. Nor to the fact that at a still passionate stage, sensitivity and weeping can be pathological expressions of self-pity.

¹¹ G. Florovsky, *Christianity and Culture*, Belmont 1974, p. 125.

¹² *Archimandrite Sophrony*, *Principles of Orthodox Asceticism*, in: *The Orthodox Ethos*, Oxford 1964, p. 261.

ble, many convents grow their own food, but because they will try to avoid waste and disrespect to natural resources. St. Dorotheos of Gaza says characteristically that the monk must keep his conscience clear with regard to God, to man, and to material things. Another most important »message« which comes from the convents is that a life under obedience does not degrade the person. I have heard many visitors commenting on the fact that nuns seem happy and fulfilled, and how in Orthodox convents the individual nuns »have their own personalities«, and are not turned out like products of a factory conveyor belt. As women, too, nuns are proof that a person's value cannot and must not be identified with their function, that women find themselves as persons by faithfully doing what God has given to each to do. That we can »contribute« not less by a task which is hidden from the world's eyes. Orthodox nuns have no complex about doing or not doing certain services in the Church or in the world. Another aspect in which they provide a message is that although they are modern in the sense that, where available and necessary, they use modern equipment and technology, they have not, as it were, »modernised« their way of life. This is, of course, visible in the matter of dress, liturgical life and other aspects. So in many ways the nuns show, as St. Peter says, even »without a word«, that it is possible and humanly fulfilling to live on earth with the eternal values at the forefront even of everyday activities. For some, this provokes a challenge. Many others tell us that just knowing we are »still here«, carrying on a way of life totally based on our belief about God, is a reassurance that they are not alone, not crazy.

The monastery provides an environment where life is arranged in an effort to minimise as far as possible any compromise with the values of the fallen world. This maximalism is not a critique of those who live in the world, who struggle to be a Christian in a non-Christian setting. On the contrary, the monastery can provide its non-monastic brother' and sisters' support in this struggle, and true monks and nuns are in fact fighting the battle (of love and prayer, and not of aggression in any form) on the front line. Any darkness and suffering in the contemporary world are literally experienced by those who pray and live the Liturgy concentratedly. This would be true even if the monasteries did not have verbal contact with »the world«. It is important to say that, because many people only value those monasteries which are most active in receiving pilgrims and providing pastoral care to lay people. I quote St. Silouan again: »[Prayer for the world] is the task of the monk. But if a monk be lukewarm and indifferent, and has not arrived at a state wherein his soul contemplates the Lord, then let him wait upon pilgrim travellers and assist with his labours those who live in the world. This, too, is pleasing to God. But rest assured that it is not the monastic life by a long way«¹³. Having said that, all the convents that I know are living in situations where the spiritual authorities encourage hospitality, and in many cases, in Western Europe certainly, this diakonia takes priority, often at the cost of other work (such as handicrafts of one sort or another), and even at the cost of the nuns' solitude, time to read, and so on. Much of the friendship, advice, encouragement, and wisdom are shared without any particular »counselling structure« in place. There are also more formal arrangements, in many of which Orthodox nuns are involved: catechism of children, talks to pilgrims in the monastery and to others outside (Orthodox and

¹³ *Archimandrite Sophrony*, *Op. cit.*, p. 408.

non-Orthodox), church camps, providing and teaching church crafts such as icons and vestments, etc. This kind of role is being undertaken not simply under pressure from authorities outside the monastery (civil and ecclesiastical), but also because holy elders and eldresses see it as a part of God's providence in our times of widespread apostasy to allow for this service. It is a service for a spiritually hungry world, and it is a service for the Church. In areas where the Orthodox are in the minority they may find it difficult even to attend church services, let alone find somewhere where confessions take place and advice may be given. (If monasteries are »extra-terrestrial«, they are certainly not »extra-ecclesial«.)

The influence of monasteries on society as a whole is impossible to measure or define. Direct influence on the ways of society would come, if it did come, successively, from person to person, and so on. Someone described a monastery as an oasis in the desert. If this analogy is appropriate, I would say that none of the nuns in these oases wish to flood the surrounding desert by any kind of force. Rather, the doors are open for those who wish to »come and see«. I would hope that of all the values they may »learn«, the first would be personal love, which is the only lasting foundation on which any society is built. Fr. Florovsky said: »What is important is a consistent use of 'eschatological measures' in the estimation of all things and events. [...] First comes love. It is not accidental that monasticism takes persistently the form of a community. It is an organisation of mutual care and help. Any work of mercy, or even a burning of the heart for somebody else's suffering or need, cannot be regarded as insignificant in the eschatological dimension. Is it too much to suggest that all creative charity is eternal? [...] Human personality, in any case, transcends history«¹⁴. It also transfigures history. St. John Chrysostom says in a sermon commenting on Christ's prayer »that they may be one as we are one«¹⁵: »But what of the monk, you will say? What of those who dwell in the mountains? [...] Though they turn away from the common life, they have many companions in the spirit. They are close bound to one another in love; and have withdrawn from the world the better to fulfill this purpose. [...] Because of this they retire from the world: that they may love more perfectly. But how can a man have friends if he is alone, you will say? [...] It is not the place that makes friends. For the monks have friends who praise them, and who would not praise them if they did not love them. And again, they pray for all men; this is the greatest proof of their love«¹⁶.

¹⁴ *Archimandrite Sophrony*, Op. cit., p. 129.

¹⁵ *John Chrysostom*, In Joannem Homilia 78, 4: PG 59, 425.

¹⁶ Op. cit. English translation: *Toal (Ed.)*, The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers, vol. 2, London 1957, p. 361–362.