

AN HISTORIC EVENT

CONSECRATION OF THE MONASTERY
OF THE TRANSFIGURATION FOR WOMEN



The Holy Liturgy was officiated outside. His Eminence Metropolitan Ireney reads the prayers for the beginning of the Holy Liturgy. He was assisted by three Bishops and a sobor of Clergy.

One of the most significant and far-reaching events in the history of the Orthodox Church in America took place on Saturday, September 28 in the little community of Wurtemberg, just outside of Ellwood City, Pa. It was the consecration of the first all-English Monastery of the Transfiguration for Women.

The monastery has the blessing of most of the Orthodox bishops in this country and is intended to receive women from all jurisdictions and to serve all Orthodox in their common language. To emphasize this fact, bishops from 3 jurisdictions performed the consecration and concelebrated the first Liturgy before a congregation of over 800 people from near and far, representing all the jurisdictions in America. The presence of 25 priest from a large number of jurisdictions gave their seal of approval of this project of great hopes for the future of Orthodoxy in America.

Monasticism has been the backbone of the Orthodox Church throughout the centuries. From within the walls of the monasteries came its spiritual leaders. The monks and nuns not only preserved the Faith but propagated it far and wide. The spiritual value of monasticism is indispensable to the Church at large and to the local parishes. The monastery is a retreat for prayer, rededication and recouping of forces to carry on the work of the Church in the world.

Monasticism has never been fully understood and appreciated by the Orthodox in America. When there is such a great need of priests and dedicated persons in the front lines of action of the parish, many cannot understand that zealous Orthodoxy should retire into the quiet of a monastery and isolate themselves from the trials and tribulations of the world. Having no precedent to measure the benefits of monasticism in this country, the doubt of its usefulness and very existence will persist in the minds of many, until the time when the effects will begin to be felt on the local level.

This, the Monastery of the Transfiguration hopes to eventually achieve. Recruiting the most able, most learned and

most dedicated women, who will forsake the state of matrimony to "marry" the Church, the monastery through its cycle of services, contemplative life, prayer, study and writing, furthering of certain skills necessary to the Church (ikon painting, vestment-making, etc.) its retreats for the laity and so many other practical services, will not only prove its worth, but hopefully start many other centers to be available to the Orthodox throughout the country in the immediate vicinity.

Ellwood City was picked for its proximity to over 100 Orthodox parishes of all jurisdictions with a great concentration of Orthodox members. Once the monastery is fully functioning, they can easily commute to it for special occasions.

The 90-acre plot upon which the first phase of a grandiose master plan was completed is isolated enough to offer privacy and close enough to make it easily available to anyone who wishes to visit it. Situated on a plateau, surrounded by wooded hills, the view on all sides is breath-taking. As I stood at the first outdoor Divine Liturgy and gazed in all directions, I could not help but recall the words of the Psalmist: "O Lord, how manifold are Thy works, in wisdom has Thou made them all. The earth is full of Thy riches." Standing before the modest redwood building, I closed my eyes and envisioned the mag-

nificent stone monastery with its many cells, work rooms, library and the many other facilities, clustered around a very beautiful, Byzantine-style church, which is projected by Mother Alexandra and those like her who still can dream, hope and work for its realization. Surely, as is in the past, founders and benefactors of monasteries will also be found in this country.

Those who attended the consecration ceremonies and the first Liturgy at the Monastery of the Transfiguration were deeply impressed by the ceremonies, by the true Christian fellowship and by the modest but imposing building.

A committee composed mostly from the Orthodox parishes in Ellwood City was in charge of all the arrangements. Parishes and priests from the Pittsburgh area assumed many of the responsibilities, such as mailing out invitations, bringing in baked goods and coming along with parishioners.

The weather was ideal — sunny, but not too warm. The police were present on the highway to direct traffic and on the grounds to assist in parking. Many parishes hired buses to bring their parishioners.

Metropolitan Ireney of the Russian Metropolia, assisted by Bishop Gerasimos of the Greek Diocese of Pittsburgh, Bishop Ambrosius of the Russian Diocese of Pittsburgh and Bishop Valerian of the Romanian Orthodox Episcopate of America, consecrated the monastery and concelebrated the Holy Liturgy. Each jurisdiction designated one priest to serve with the four bishops. The other priests took part in the procession robed in their cassocks and assembled in the church and the area around the outdoor altar during the Liturgy. Responses were given by the Serbian Choir from Midland.

Only the bishops, priests, nuns and a small group of laymen were able to enter the "A" shape church, which can accommodate about 100 persons. Ordinarily it will be more than adequate for the use of the nuns, but on this day only a small part of the participants were able to witness the consecration of the altar.

To the right and left of the church are cells for the nuns and guests, a kitchen, refractory, workroom and a 2-car garage. They were not completely finished at the time of the consecration. Some par-

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The central building of the Monastery with the Chapel. During the Service of Consecration the crowd gathered outside since very few were able to get inside.

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ishes and Ladies' groups have taken it upon themselves to furnish the cells and other rooms.

An asphalt road had to be built from the main highway to the monastery building, electricity had to be brought in, septic tanks and water pumps installed, which was a very costly undertaking.

The redwood building is on a slight incline, overlooking the large, open space on which the monastery will eventually be built. At that time, God-willing, the present building will be used as a guest house.

The building is more Gothic than Byzantine, but the steep roof church is reminiscent of the wooden churches in the mountainous regions of the Orthodox countries in Eastern Europe. The architecture was dictated by expediency rather than by design. The plans were standard and much of the building was prefabricated, thus bringing the building cost down. The larger monastery building contemplated will be built according to specifications and the usage of the Orthodox Church.

There were many complications putting up the present building. Work should have started last Autumn, but the bad weather and snow forced the builders to start only in the Spring. At that time, they were plagued by mud until the new asphalt road was built. Many unforeseen problems arose, but Mother Alexandra, with the help of her committee, overcame each one.

Though ample time was given to have the building finished in time for the consecration, a few days before, there were still many things unfinished. Everyone jumped in to give a helping hand. The Fathers from the first all-English Holy Resurrection Monastic Community in Grass Lake, Michigan, pitched in to get the altar and church ready for the great event.

The iconostasis is made of laced redwood, upon which are placed beautiful ikons. The church is carpeted and on both ends are large colored glass windows.

The Bishops and celebrants, robed in white cover-alls, said the proper prayers, washed the altar table symbolically, placed in the relics, attached the 4 evangelists, properly covered and draped the altar table with linen and damask, sprinkled the altar and interior of the church with holy water, anointed the altar table and the interior walls with holy oil and placed the necessary appointments on the altar table. While this was being done, the bishops said the proper prayers, the celebrants read from the psalms, the clergy together with the choir, gave the proper responses and the congregation watched with rapture the ancient rite of consecration.

It was elevating to hear the bishops pray in English and in their own mother tongue. The choir ended the consecration Service with a joyous hymn of thanksgiving.

After the ceremony, the bishops, priests, deacons and congregation went out in procession to the open-air altar covered with a canopy, to

start the Holy Liturgy. The altar table was erected on a slight incline behind the altar of the church so that the congregation could watch. On one side was the choir and on the other side were the clergy, robed in black. At the foot of the slope, about 800 persons listened intently to the Holy Liturgy which was sung mostly in English. The litanies were said by 2 deacons, alternating with the ephomosis given by the bishops or priests. Many priests and laymen received Holy Communion.

The sermon was preached in English by Greek Bishop Gerasimos. At the end of the Liturgy, Metropolitan Ireney spoke in Russian, which was immediately translated into English, on the significance of the day, bringing praises especially to Mother Alexandra for her untiring efforts to make this event possible.

After all the Services, which lasted from 10 a.m. to 1:30 p.m., a luncheon was served to all the participants. Most of them took their plates with food and sat out on the green grass to eat. There was also a bake sale of pastries donated by a number of surrounding parishes.

The bishops, some of the priests and guests, including some Roman Catholic nuns, were served at a table laid out in the garage.

Some of the participants left after lunch, but many remained on for the continuous Service in the newly-consecrated church, culminating with Vespers served by visiting priests. Responses were given by the choir.

Mother Eudoxia, the Superior of the Mother House in France, flew in to attend the ceremony with one of the Sisters. They truly made a lasting impression upon those who saw or met them. Besides Mother Alexandra, who is the acting Superior, there is a postulant, Sister Despina of Ft. Wayne, Ind., a registered nurse, who also works part-time in the local hospital. There are also some other girls in residence, who are considering taking the veil. Mother Alexandra is busy answering the many letters she receives from women desirous of joining the monastery.

Holy Liturgy will be officiated twice or three times a week by priests from the area. On Sundays, the nuns will go to parishes nearby to attend the Divine Liturgy for the time being until they get a permanent chaplain. A house has already been purchased to accommodate a priest and his family.

So far, nearly \$100,000 were spent on the project, a part of which is mortgage money. Many donations were made at the time of the consecration. Now that the building is up and the monastic life has begun, it is hoped that moral and financial support will increase. The nuns eventually hope to be self-supporting, but in the meantime are dependent on good will of those who understand and appreciate their efforts.

The historic event of September 28th marks a milestone in the struggle for unity

among us. Here was true unity. No one asked which jurisdiction one belonged to. They just rejoiced in this common endeavor in a language all understood and in an atmosphere which was truly uplifting.

The Romanian Orthodox Episcopate is happy to have helped during the initial stages of this great endeavor — not as Romanians, but as Americans and Orthodox. The monastery belongs to all Orthodox. It is there to be used by all Orthodox. It is the fervent hope of good Orthodox that the monastery will always remain above jurisdictional and nationalistic differences — and be just Orthodox and American.

LETTER TO BISHOP VALERIAN

Your Grace:

As an American Orthodox of Greek background and as a member of our Armed Forces now serving overseas (Korea), I want to tell you how pleased I was to read of your comments at the recent World Council of Churches meeting. My wife sent me a clipping from the Saturday, July 13 issue of the Los Angeles Herald-Examiner in which you were quoted in a story with a Uppsala dateline from the United Press International.

I also was shocked at the large number of Americans who tried to use the Uppsala meeting as a forum for their own political views, especially regarding the war in Vietnam. Your suggestion that if the delegates wanted to censure the war, then they should pass a resolution of censure against all wars including World War II, etc., was a good one, and I am sure helped to put the issue in its proper perspective.

Your comment on trying to change the social systems of all nations, not just the United States' system was also very sound.

I am pleased that you spoke out as you did on these subjects, and hope that you will continue to speak out on the issues of the day. Our Orthodox bishops in America need to become more involved in the mainstream of American life, social reform, and other such areas, but not to the excess to which some Protestant and Catholic groups have gone.

The number one objective of all Orthodox in America, clergy and laity alike, should be the unification of the various national ethnic churches into a strong American Church, so that our voice might be better heard throughout the land. Please continue your work in this direction as shown by your own actions and those of Father Vasile Hategan in the pages of SOLIA.

Clifford T. Argue,
1st Lt., U.S.A.F.