Asceticism in Community
Part 1 of a Lenten Retreat
Saint Vladimir Seminary
First Week of Great Lent 2020

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

I would like to express my thanks to Father Chad for the invitation to offer this year's Lenten retreat within the community of the Orthodox Theological Seminary of Saint Vladimir. I also congratulate him on his name day, the feast of Saint Chad of Lichfield.

Our society, the broader community in which we exist as Orthodox Christians, is one that does not have much patience for Jesus Christ, for the Church, or for anything related to God. So the concept of a "First Week of Great Lent" as a path towards a deeper personal connection to God is perhaps even further away from the spirit, or even the comprehension, of this age.

And yet, here we are, gathered once again for the First Week of Great Lent precisely for such a retreat, not as individuals seeking self-fulfillment, but as a community reflecting on the common aspects of our journey towards Christ. As such, each of us as a person is not just reflecting on that journey, but rather actively trying to figure it out. What exactly we are trying to figure out is difficult to articulate, but I would propose that it has something to do with the reality that our journey towards Christ, our ascetical life, is almost always discerned within a community.

Although a great bulk of the Lenten liturgical hymns emphasize the personal efforts that are required ("Open unto me the gates of repentance," "I have become like the Prodigal, or like the Pharisee, or like the foolish virgins", and, of course, the Great Canon of Saint Andrew of Crete which brings us to reflect in so many ways on our separation from God and to call out to Him: "Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me"), it can equally be said that all of this personal work, this ascetical activity, this soul-searching and repentance, takes place primarily in the company of others. If we are seeking to find life within our own hearts, then we must also acknowledge, along with Saint Silouan that, in our journey towards Christ, "Our brother is our life."

Whether we are speaking of the monastery, the family, or the seminary community, we are both alone, yet never alone: striving in our own hearts to meet God but also struggling to figure out how my brother, my wife, my husband, my professor, my student, have a part in this. Saint Isaac the Syrian says of the monastic state that "a monk is one who is separated from all and united with all." So even in the way of life which is most characterized by alone-ness, the monastic life of the "monos" – the one who is alone or single – there is an inescapable context of community. All of us are, in some measure, alone and yet together.

We can see this expressed in this First Week of Great Lent, for example, in the description offered by Saint Gregory Palamas in his 6th homily for the Wednesday of the First Week of Great Lent. He writes:

> For the last two weeks our city was given over to gluttony and lack of self-restraint, and straightaway we had troubles, shouting, fights, disturbances, shameless songs and obscene laughter. But this week when the fast came it made everything more honourable. It took us away from frivolity's expensive cares, stopped us toiling for the sake of our useless stomachs, set us instead to works of repentance and persuaded us not to labor for the food which perishes but for the food which endures to eternal life.

During Lent, everyone individually and personally begins to work on the salutary labors that help them to grow spiritually and to overcome their passions, but there is a communal effect of this activity. He continues:

> Where are now the slaughter of animals, the aroma of roasting meat, the variety of sauces and the cooks' best endeavours? Where are the men who run around the streets and pollute the air with their impure voices? Where are those who beat the drum and make music around houses and tables, and their devotees who join in with applause and eat their fill of the food set before them to the accompaniment of kettledrums and flutes? Where are those who spend their days and nights at parties, who are always looking for places to drink, who keep each other company in drunkenness and the shameful acts that result from it? Once the fast was proclaimed all these evils went away and all things good took their place. Instead of disgusting songs, mouths now sing holy psalms. Instead of obscene laughter, there is salutary sorrow and tears. Instead of undisciplined outings and wanderings, everyone takes one and the same way to Christ's Holy Church. If unlimited eating produces a dense swarm of sins, fasting is the root of all virtues and the foundation of God's commandments.

We may not live in Thessalonica in the 14th century, but I know that every Orthodox Christian has experienced the change that takes place during the First Week of Great Lent, both inwardly and outwardly, that is, both in my heart and in my relations with my brothers and sisters.

It is important to recall that, although this particular description is from a

single occasion, it is a scene and atmosphere that would have taken place on a yearly basis. Every year, the same calm would descend upon the city, but every year the noise of the previous days as described by Saint Gregory would have taken place as well. And every year, it was a communal experience, just as it becomes for us today.

The challenge comes in preserving this change in our own hearts, in our families, and in communities like a seminary when the world around us rages with political strife, financial crises, and health scares, all of which are blasted to us every second of the day through our televisions, computers, and smartphones; all of which intrude upon our efforts to repent, to pray, to forgive, and to love. The First Week of Great Lent, in some ways, becomes a microcosm of our own life. And with each First Week of Lent, with each Holy Week, with each Pascha and Bright week, with every single liturgical year that we pass through, we have the opportunity to practice not only our ascetical discipline, but our training in our communion with those around us, those who love us and those who hate us, and those who have asked us to pray for them.

I have not prepared for you an academic presentation for these four sessions of retreat, nor have I managed to compose a well-ordered reflection on a particular theme that I can neatly outline in four clearly identifiable sections. If you are looking for something like that, then you can read my Four Pillars booklet. I have, nevertheless, thought to present some reflections which are loosely built around my own experience of life in community. When one mentions experience, there is often the implication that one has acquired a certain expertise or competence in a particular area.

This is not the sense in which I am using the word "experience." Rather, I take it in the sense that our Fathers have used it: the efforts of feeble and broken human beings to encounter the living God. We are all experiencing God to the degree that we are able and sometimes in spite of the annoyances of those in our community. Our efforts are, in fact, most often a complex mess of success and failure.

As the prayer before communion puts it, we "stand before the gates of the Thy temple and do not forsake our wicked thoughts." But then, like the tax collector, the woman of Canaan, and the thief, in some mysterious fashion, the Lord "opens to us the interior depths of His love for mankind and receives us." Such encounters with God, such experience of His grace and love are deeply personal, even as they are often rare in their manifestation. They are rare, not because of some deficiency in God or because of His capriciousness, of course. But neither are they rare because of some comprehensive failure on our part. Certainly, we are all weak, and frail, and lacking in faith, and lonely, and despondent at times, and these states are not always pleasant. But it is often in the midst of these experiences, which are aggravated by our having to deal with others in our life, that we are able to receive fruit in our ascetical endeavors. This fruit is manifested in our hearts but also, like the city of Thessalonika in the 14th century, and like our own journey in 2020, within the community we are a part of.

During my own journey towards Christ in community, I have undertaken four visits to the Holy Mountain and to the Monastery of Saint John the Baptist in Essex, England. I kept a record of each of those visits, noting moments of inspiration and words of encouragement or clarity that I

received from a number of individuals, monastic and non-monastic. These trips were a crystallization of a particular point in my life, but like the hymns of the First Week of Great Lent, they remain as reminders and sources of encouragement to me, and so I will share some aspects of these pilgrimages, while also incorporating some other words that have helped me along the way.

I suspect that a fundamental constant in communal living is that one frequently wishes that one could get away from that community. What monk or nun has not thought to leave his or her monastery; what child has not had the temptation to run away from home; what husband or wife has not been led to the point of wanting to separate from their spouse; what seminarian has not thought that the efforts of enduring the rigors of theological formation were simply too much to bear?

When I entered the monastery, I knew in my heart that it was the right place for me, but at the same time, I had those nagging thoughts at time that would suggest that this was not a good monastery at all: there is too much activity here; the neighboring seminary is a great distraction; there are too many parishioners that come here; there is no resident abbot but rather a Metropolitan who lives far away and has no direct influence on the monastery, some brothers talk too much, etc. For the first few years of my monastic life, such thoughts would arise and with them, plans to leave this monastery and go to another, more perfect, community, or to leave and return to the world. This was part of my ascetical struggle at the time and it was such thoughts, in part, that compelled me to take my first trip to the Holy Mountain in December of 1991.

During that first pilgrimage, my understanding for community life, and how one should live in community, changed. I encountered well-run monasteries and not so well run monasteries. I stayed in clean cells and dirty cells. I saw saintly monks and obnoxious monks. I was inspired to stay in the Garden of the Mother of God and inspired to return home to the imperfect monastery of my repentance. But above all, I came to the realization (or perhaps I have come to the realization over time) that it is the very community we sojourn in that is an integral part of our ascetical striving, of our life in Christ.

What is asceticism? There are many definitions, but I like the following description which is offered to us by Archimandrite Sophrony: "For us," he says, "Christ is the absolute truth. He is God-the-Creator and God-the-Saviour. His commandments are the Uncreated Light of divinity. The essence of Orthodox asceticism lies in striving to make these commandments the one law of our whole temporal and eternal being."[1]

The foundation of our asceticism is the Holy Gospel, to “make the commandments the one law of our whole temporal and eternal being” and these commandments “are the Uncreated Light of divinity.” This is why, in the prayer before the Gospel, we ask the Lord to *illumine our hearts* and why the Psalmist looks to the commandments as *light unto my feet*. And this is why we need a community in which to exercise a spiritual manner of living *both thinking and doing such things as are well-pleasing unto God.*

[1]Archimandrite Sophrony, "Principles of Orthodox Asceticism," in A.J. Philippou, ed., *The Orthodox Ethos: Studies in Orthodoxy*, volume 1 , page 259.

But the distance between these theological ideals and the reality of our own life in community can be vast.

At one of the sketes on the Holy Mountain, during that first pilgrimage, I met Father Nikon, who lived alone in a cell. He was an iconographer and a photographer. He was very proud of his Nikon cameras and he had promotional stickers from that camera maker posted around his cell. I was only able to spend an hour with him because he was expecting a group of 6 or 7 pilgrims. He told me that skete life is hard. "You have to be a millionaire to become a poor man!" He said this because, on his own, he was responsible for absolutely everything, including finding the funding to actually live there and do his work of iconography. He said: "I cannot finish an icon because it takes too long to light the fire!" And yet, he had a great joy and a great peace about him. He was alone, yet he needed a community to help him be alone, and that community (the pilgrims that he hosted) was sometimes a burden, sometimes a joy.

As I walked along the rugged paths of the desert parts of the Holy Mountain, I beheld the glorious view from the heights of the mountain, overlooking a sea of clouds and I said: "I should find a little hut on the side of the mountain and just stay here." I also stood in the esonarthex of the Catholicon for matins in the early morning cold of winter, unable to have the boldness to go stand next to the wood stove that some of the older monks were hovering around, not understanding a word of the services and thinking: "I could never stay here." But between those two extremes, I found some consolation and some encouragement in my own ascetical life, in my own life of community, for the asceticism of community life.

I will end with a story that I have told many times before. It is the story of one of the events that occurred on the Holy Mountain that convinced me to return to the monastery of my repentance. This small event took place during the service of matins at one of the ruling monasteries. I noticed an older monk, sitting prayerfully in his stall, praying with a long prayer rope dangling from his fingers. Another older monk happened to pass by this first monk and he paused. He looked at the prayer rope and then back at the monk. He then began to gesture as if to indicate that he thought that the prayer rope belonged to him. He tried to take the prayer rope from the first monk and for a few seconds, I witnessed a tug of war between two brothers in community, each holding on to what he thought belonged to him.

It was at that moment that I realized that these monks were human beings, subject to human foibles even in the midst of their sacred striving for communion with Christ through prayer. It can be the same for us, imperfect and incomplete human beings, as we struggle together for the life of the Kingdom.