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The Monastic Vocation in Today's World

I am the Gerondissa Iakóvi, abbess of the Monastery of St John the Baptist. I come from Greece. Our monastery is near the village of Akritochori of the eparchy of Sidirokastro of the department of Serres.

In the monastic usage of the Orthodox Church the term "Gerondas", or "Gerondissa" (the feminine form), signifies the spiritual guide of a monastic community. Usually the Gerondas is also the abbot of the monastery and the community's confessor.

We have come from a distant country to be with you. The connecting link is the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, who envelops us all with his love and struggles to realize the Lord's commandment concerning unity and fraternity.

GIVE ME YOUR HEART

The Lord became incarnate and appeared on earth to bring us the joyful message of his own peace, the message of reconciliation between human beings, which leads to reconciliation with him, to salvation. And his new commandment, the prerequisite of salvation, is "Love one another" (John 13:34).

By his incarnation, sacrifice on the cross and resurrection, Jesus Christ has restored the whole human person to its ancient beauty, crowning it "with glory and honour" (Heb 2:7). A person who has been reborn reels in the face of these great and wonderful gifts of God, and cries out: "What shall we give to God in return for all he has given us?" (cf. Rom 11:35). God, who is Love as strong as death, replies: "My son, give me your heart" (Prov 23:24).

Following this exhortation, the holy martyrs of the early Christian and later centuries watered the Church of Christ with their blood.

Later, when the Christian faith prevailed, loving hearts, inspired by the Holy Spirit, sought another mode by which to express their love towards the Lord who loved us and give something in return: the voluntary martyrdom of renunciation of the world and dedication to Christ the Bridegroom. This is the path of asceticism, of taking up one's personal cross in the footsteps of the slaughtered lamb.

In the days of St Anthony the Great, when the ascetic life made its official appearance, the desert slipped in. A thirsty and barren land bore the beautiful fruits of asceticism and the renunciation of the world and of one's own will. "Rejoice, you childless one, you who bear no children, burst into song and shout, you who endure no birth pangs; for the children of the desolate woman are more numerous than the children of the one who is married" (Gal 4:27).

The aim of a monastic is the gradual cleansing of the heart from passions. A purified heart becomes the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit, and the person who struggles to attain this moves towards divinisation, or *theosis*, by grace. "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me" (Ps 50:12).

Against one's own will, which is the primary cause of humanity's fall, monastics set obedience, that is, the mortification of one's own will and submission to the will of God.

The fundamental orientation of this journey is provided for us by spiritual fatherhood. The spiritual father of every monastic community, whether of men or of women, is the Gerondas, who fulfils the type of Christ and occupies his place. Thus the monastic's journey becomes safe and free from error, deviating neither to the right nor to the left of the royal highway that Christ the King laid out, having become obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.

Since the Gerondas is regarded as the mouth of Christ by those who have entrusted themselves to obedience, he is obliged to be guided by God so as to give correct direction and solutions. It is this that gives those under obedience security in their journey.

A great impediment in this journey is rationalism, which raises up the sick mind, in the biblical sense of the term, as a wall between God and humanity.

At the opposite pole, monastics endeavour by every means and with success to reject any compromise with what is accepted as reasonable according to worldly standards. St Symeon Stylites practised such an austere, and by human standards irrational, mode of asceticism (he went so far as to live for a long time on top of a pillar) that even his fellow-ascetics were scandalized for a while. St Maximos Kausokalyvites lived on Mount Athos in a state of such self-denial and material destitution that some thought him out of his mind!

But herein lies a mystery! Deviating from reason can be downwards and result in the irrational, or it can be upwards and result in the suprarational. A person who has not been reborn spiritually is unable to discern the difference between the irrational and the suprarational. Purification from the passions is needed, along with the recovery of spiritual health, if we are to apprehend what is beyond understanding. That is why the Lord used to say "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!" (Luke 8:8) and "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see!" (Luke 10:23).

What we may conclude is that beyond the limits of human reason stretches the infinite expanse of faith. It needs to be understood that the space of monastic life which we enter into escapes our comprehension; it is a holy land. We must, like Moses, remove our sandals, the created limits of common reason, in order to enter into the darkness of the mystery of another way of life. In the first place this way of life bears the marks of a change according to God. The call (*klēsi*) from above, the way in which it occurs, is often inexplicable and does not always accord with the inclination (*klisi*) and apparent interests of the person being called.

ACCEPTING THE DIVINE CALL FOR LOVE

God entrusted the great Moses with leading the people of Israel to the Promised Land in a dynamic and absolute manner: You shall go. Indeed, God is shown anthropomorphically as becoming angry at Moses' hesitancy.

The Forerunner and Baptizer of the Lord, than whom no one was greater among those born of women, received the divine call when he was still in his mother's womb. From childhood he was "in the wilderness" (Luke 1:80), and from childhood he wandered in the desert, reflecting in a mysterious way God's plan for the apostolate that had been assigned to him and the destiny awaiting him.

The sacred Evangelists tell us that the disciples were called by the Lord in a manner that was simple and natural. Before his glory was revealed, without making any agreement between them, without demanding any declaration of faith, in a simple, cheerful but also authoritative way, he addressed the Galileans with his "follow me". Did they clearly understand what this call implied? The sequel proved that they did not. They all thought to a greater or lesser degree that it concerned a Messiah who wanted to establish an earthly kingdom. "How foolish you are and how slow of heart" (Luke 24:25). The descent of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost was needed before they could understand the precise nature of their own apostolate.

In the case of the Apostle Paul, who originally persecuted the Christians, Christ came and entered dynamically into his life, refuting any psychological or natural explanation of the matter.

In the case of the martyrs of our Church, the call to martyrdom is beyond all reason. Although they could have lived a Christian life in secret and pretended to be pagans, they did not do so but preferred a martyr's death.

Christian monastics of both sexes have chosen to mortify their own wills, to nail a worldly attitude to the cross, and to apply pressure on themselves throughout their life in accordance with Paul's saying: "The world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Gal 6:14). They are those who have made eunuchs of themselves for the sake of the kingdom of God. Let us heed the Lord's words: "For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can" (Matt 19:12).

Going more deeply into the monastic vocation, we can say that God addresses his "follow me" to us simply, discreetly, but also irresistibly, always, however, with absolute respect for human freedom. "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me", he said to the rich young man (Matt 19:21). The Lord himself reveals that many will be called but few will accept the call. "For many are called but few are chosen" (Matt 22:14).

The greatest hindrance to the acceptance of monastic life, and to the acceptance of the Christian life in general, is our attachment to what belongs to this world, to material things. The Lord, however, demands that we should make love our priority and exclusively so. He demands of believers that they should renounce persons dear to them if these militate against his will. "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me..." (Matt 10:37).

From a person who is wholly dedicated, from a monk or nun, he demands the renunciation of parents, of family, of marriage and of every other earthly tie so that alone they should surrender themselves to God alone, to him and his providential care.

But the power motivating us to dedicate ourselves to the monastic life and in general to a life in accordance with God is – and must always be – the following and this alone: Absolute love, love for our Lord Jesus Christ who loved us even unto death. Love is not reasonable; it is the wholehearted self-surrender to the beloved. "You have charmed me, O Christ, by desire and you have transformed me by your divine *eros*..." (Ninth Ode of the Canon of the Transfiguration).

In the case of the Gospel harlot, what was the rationale behind her pouring out precious ointment on to Christ's feet and drying them with her hair? "Because she loved much" (Luke 7:47).

Love is the Church's mode of expression, the mode that makes every effort effective. When love is put into practice, it is the supreme living worship offered to God.

MONASTIC LIFE IN THE ATHONITE TRADITION

"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever" (Heb 13:8). The Church, then, has ceaselessly put forth like green shoots, and will continue to put forth like green shoots, those lovers of the heavenly Bridegroom who have chosen to dedicate themselves wholly to him, their hearts wounded by his divine *eros*, namely, those who have embraced the monastic life.

Enriched by the experience and tradition of the Church, the monastic life took shape in the course of the centuries and still continues to be shaped. It has, of course, undergone developments in its external elements, but its essential constituents have remained unchanged: renunciation of a worldly attitude, non-possessiveness, obedience, mortification of one's own will, virginity, continence, vigilance, uninterrupted prayer.

In our monastery specifically, the entire organization of the nuns' activities, the daily programme, the mode of life, the services, and even the architecture of the buildings and the churches has been modelled on the experience of the monks of the Holy Mountain of Athos.

On Athos, the garden of the *Panagia* (the All-Holy Mother of God), as it is called, a tradition stretching from the sixth century to the present day has built up a vast and inestimable body of experience on which, acting prudently, we need to draw. The Holy Mountain has lived the monastic ideal for centuries and its experiences have radiated like beams of light to the farthest corners of the Christian world.

Our monastery enjoys the special blessing of having been founded by the Athonite Gerondas, Alexios, Abbot of the Monastery of Xenophontos of the Holy Mountain. He brings us and communicates to us what he experiences in the Garden of the Panagia, namely, the monastic *typikon* (or rule) of his monastery.

The relationship we have with Athonite fathers and the spiritual guidance we receive from them is of real benefit to us and also brings us great joy. They bear stamped on them the traces of the sanctifying tradition of Athonite monasticism.

In the time of St Anthony, many monks used to go to seek the advice of this "desert guide" on a variety of matters that were troubling them. One of these monks never asked him about anything. When St Anthony wanted to know why, the monk replied: "It is enough for me to see you, Abba."

We experience this even today when we meet inspired spiritual fathers. Simply to behold them is often sufficient for one to receive an answer to the problem that is troubling one. Here we have the communication of a message and a call from God in mystery and silence!

DISCERNING GOD'S CALL

It is possible for God to call a group of people with each one receiving the divine call in a different way, and with the heart of each one leaping at God's invitation in a different way.

This call sometimes comes from an unexpected or strange coincidence; sometimes it comes after negative or even scandalous events. That is why Basil the Great observes that it is possible even for a simple thought about renouncing the world to be a call from God, such a call having mysterious origins.

The ways of the Most High are truly unsearchable. "The Spirit blows where it wills" in the words of John the Evangelist (John 3:8). And indeed we can confirm the invincible force by which God enters our lives, discreetly yet powerfully.

At the outset the scheme of things and the conditions of monastic life do not seem easy. On the contrary, they seem in practice very difficult. The tough asceticism, fasting, night-vigils, the often onerous work, non-possessiveness, obedience and the mortification of one's own will are not ideals that will be found alluring by any young man or woman. The power of the divine call, which operates in a manner beyond our comprehension in the monastic world, is therefore surprising.

For a young person the promise of death, that is to say, the putting to death of the worldly man and the renunciation of the world, cannot be considered reasonable and accessible. Despite all this, and the fact that today people have become soft and unused to laborious work because of the many comforts provided through technological development, monasticism is flourishing and the monastic vocation continues to attract, contrary to the high value given to secular society today and divorced from any compromise with what people consider reasonable. "You did not choose me but I chose you" (John 15:16).

A contemporary Gerondas observes that in the calling of every monk God obscures the harsh reality so that the aspirant is not put off. In the course of his journey the monk will understand that his perception of monasticism was extremely deficient, not only with regard to the difficulties and

various temptations, but chiefly with regard to the grandeur that is gradually revealed to him as he perseveres in the promises he made at his tonsure. The monastic way of life, the eighth sacrament of the Church, as many call it, includes the grandeur of the Cross, whereby the Cross is shown to be constitutive of the Godhead, constitutive of the divinisation by grace which is granted to us by crucified Love, the Lord who is both God and man.

In the words of Christ's high-priestly prayer, "Father, glorify your Son" (John 17:1), and in the declaration of God the Father, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again" (John 12:28) the Fathers of the Church see the Cross. Historically the Cross was a scandal and a sign of contradiction ("a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" [1 Cor 1:23-4], as the Apostle Paul proclaims about the Crucified one). It is natural that historically monasticism, the monastic vocation and its reception should also meet with this attitude. Christ was crucified, "leaving you an example" (1 Peter 2:21) concerning the journey of crucifixion which the faithful are called upon to follow in order to share in his Resurrection, that is, in salvation, which is eternal communion with him.

Anyone who desires to do so can enter into the monastic life and confirm that this is possible regardless of his or her previous manner of life, because, as already mentioned, the ways of the Lord are unfathomable. Nevertheless, the earlier a person becomes a conscious and active member of the Church the easier it is for him or her to be initiated into the monastic vocation and respond to it.

The desire to dedicate oneself to the monastic life remains unshakable and can be satisfied, provided always that it is leavened by stability in the Church's faith and is not bound up with decisions dictated by emotional factors or personal problems in one's life.

Mistaken decisions in this respect bring to the surface, in the course of one's journey, the real causes of the step taken. The monk or nun who has made a mistake in entering the monastic life experiences a tragic situation.

If the aspirant is not possessed by the fear of God and does not burn with love for the heavenly Bridegroom, he or she will quickly cave in when confronted with the temptations and hardships of monastic life.

That is why a period of testing, a noviciate, has been laid down for aspirants to the monastic life. At this stage the Gerondas and spiritual father of the monastery investigates the ability of aspirants to let go of every bond tying them to worldly things, to free themselves definitively from what binds them to the past. If the investigation is to prove positive, aspirants must gradually succeed in distancing themselves from their previous mode of life. At the same time, the Gerondas will be discerning from the aspirants' progress what it is that God wants from these particular Christians. That is to say, are they suited to dedication to the monastic life, or is there some other more beneficial future for them? What path is best for them so that a "Glory be to God" will emerge from their lives?

Freed now from every worldly distraction, aspirant monks or nuns will try to learn experientially about the monastic life, to understand clearly its meaning, its presuppositions, and its difficulties. If they respond to it sufficiently well they will complete the noviciate stage, which according to circumstances lasts two or more years. Then comes monastic tonsure. During the rite of tonsure, the aspirants' hair is cut and they enter into the monastic community. They promise before the altar in the presence of the whole community that they will accept the rules and manner of life of the monastic way and that they will remain in the monastery until the end of their earthly lives, observing obedience and renouncing their own will.

His or her basic duty is the participation in the divine offices, which are sung in the *katholikon*, the monastery's central church.

DAILY LIFE

To each nun a particular kind of work is assigned from the beginning of the year to assist the smooth running of the monastery.

Sometimes, a *synaxis* of the Community is called, at the discretion of the abbess, with the object of discussing spiritual subjects and allowing the nuns to socialize with each other in Christ.

By the observance of this daily *typikon* and by the assigning of ministries our intention is that our lives should be adorned and accompanied by the remembrance of God. "One should recall him, or rather, breathe him in," as St Gregory the Theologian observes. The monologistic prayer, "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me," is the salt which ceaselessly gives savour to the life of monastics. Thus each of their activities and tasks is sanctified by the remembrance of God and becomes a liturgy and a prayer. This, moreover, is the sense of the Apostle Paul's exhortation, "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess 5:17).

Nonetheless, within the Church, beyond any ordinance, what exists and operates is the freedom of the children of God. This freedom in Christ serves to resolve and remedy, in love and mutual affection, the circumstantial demands and needs that arise.

The infinite expanse of faith and of the divine economy is unfathomable. And the mystery of the monastic vocation is beyond rational investigation and research.

During these last decades in the so-called civilized world we have come to possess an abundance of material goods and enjoy a comfortable way of life. Scientific and technological progress, however, has unfortunately also come to pose a danger to us. And this is because it has also brought about moral laxity and a critical attitude to traditional values.

The cultural level of people has improved, even though in many ways this concerns the attainment of knowledge and skills without the formation in people of what it means to be true human beings.

Young monks and nuns are usually graduates of institutes of higher education. They clearly have a modern view of reality and a different mode of thinking from that of the older monastics.

It is therefore important and necessary that these facts should also be taken into account in the manner in which the young are integrated into monasticism. The aim is that they themselves should find spiritual fulfilment and in their turn enrich their environment. The need therefore arises to find ways of adapting the external elements of monastic life without damaging or changing its essence. For that reason discerning spiritual guides, the Gerondes, allow by economy some relative relaxation in the manner of life of young monastics. At the same time, in the contact they have with them, they try to fit their spiritual guidance to each person's cultural level. "I have become all things to all people so that I might by any means save some," as the Apostle Paul remarks (1 Cor 9:22).

A relevant and illuminating case in this respect is that of the fourth-century desert father, St Arsenios the Great. When Arsenios, who had lived and grown up in the imperial palace, became a monk, he allowed himself a little physical comfort in his monastic life, which scandalized some of the other monks. On their being informed of his origins, however, and of his previous life, they understood why the saint had adopted this approach and were impressed by his discernment.

In our own days it is beginning to be apparent that monasteries should not limit themselves simply to austere *ascesis* and *hesychia* [or stillness] in the strict meaning of the term, but through the adaptation of their programme of operation should radiate the loving mode of life of monastics to the whole Christian world. By becoming the faithful visitors of this experience, they are led to participation in the "other way of life" which the Church proclaims and which monastics attempt to put into practice.

It is with inexpressible joy that we observe that monasteries have become a magnet attracting people. Those burdened by the problems of life find there an oasis in the midst of the desert of social alienation where humanity endures trials, thirst and perplexities.

THE DIVINE CALL FOR ALL

To conclude, the divine call to dedicate our lives to Christ the Bridegroom does not belong exclusively to monastics. It is addressed to every human being, especially to Christians who have lost a sense of direction. It is addressed to those who seek truth, who desire a greater human sensitivity. It is addressed to those who are looking for meaning in their lives, to everyone who yearns for life. "Come to me all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (Mattt 11:28).

Material well-being is unable to give rest to the weary traveller. Such may also be offered from another source more effectively and usually proves temporarily alluring. A pressing need today is for the authentic face of the Church to be made apparent, to shine like a lighthouse in the dark days of our age.

Let us show a little understanding for those weighed down by burdens difficult to bear. Let us listen to people who have no one to talk to and express their pain to. Let us show some solidarity with our brothers and sisters suffering desperation and despair. Let us pray fervently for the whole world, for those who know and for those who do not know the true God.

With regard to all these people we have a sacred duty to stand alongside them. Who knows God's designs for each of us? At all events, the will of God is a loving heart.

I should like to end with a characteristic story from the *Gerontikon*, known in English as *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*.

The devil once appeared to a certain monk and said: "You are not achieving anything here where you are. Get away from here." The monk was caused suffering by this temptation. The thought tormented him exceedingly. Finally, he went to a discerning Gerondas and sought his advice. He replied, "If the evil one comes again to you and says the same things, you are to say to him: 'I am guarding the walls!'"

That is to say, the fact that I am here out of love for Christ might seem ridiculous and irrational by worldly standards. My poor efforts to struggle to lead the Christian life might seem insignificant. Yet here I am dead and buried in the tomb of my personal satisfaction and self-esteem.

That is because whatever people gain from the world, from their capabilities and virtues, from their reputation and good name, from the esteem of their fellows, none of this in the end overcomes death.

It is then that the only remaining perspective of life is he who by his death on the Cross abolished death and by his life-bearing Resurrection gives us all the possibility, by sharing in his journey to the Cross, to share also in his Resurrection to eternal blessedness. Amen.