

The Monastic Vocation: Gift and Cross

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The small village of Emmaus was located seven miles away from Jerusalem. If you go leisurely by foot, it will take you about two hours to cover this distance. On the 9th of April AD 30, on the first day of the week, two sad-looking Jews left Jerusalem and headed toward Emmaus. The first one was Cleopas and the second one was presumably the evangelist-to-be Luke, who later described this journey in detail. They were discussing something intensely, yet they looked so obviously downcast that a stranger stopped them and asked why they were sad and what they were talking about. The reason of their sadness were the tragic events of the past week: their benevolent Teacher Jesus Christ was treacherously captured, subjected to an unfair trial, sentenced to the most violent and humiliating execution invented by people, killed, and entombed in a cave. But on that day, the rumors of His resurrection had reached them. Some women had gone to the tomb and had not found the body of Jesus. Then they saw an Angel who told them their Teacher was alive. All this was very confusing. How strange that was! Unusual! Wrong! For the reason that they hoped that Jesus was the Savior of Israel. Besides it was very strange that the man coming from Jerusalem had heard nothing about it and asked them this kind of questions.

Now everybody knows that the man who asked the travellers these questions was the resurrected Jesus Christ himself, whom the disciples did not recognize since *"their eyes were kept from recognizing him"* (Luke 24:16). So Jesus Christ walked with them to Emmaus and talked to them all that time. He was telling them that their Teacher's path had been thoroughly described in the Holy Scriptures. He provided them with proofs, citing the Bible and recalling testimonies of Moses and the most contemporary prophets since all of them had talked about Him, His mission, and His teaching. The day was coming to the end as the travellers reached Emmaus. The disciples invited the Stranger to join them for the evening meal and He agreed. They asked Him to break the bread as a guest of honor. And Jesus Christ took the bread, blessed and broke it, and then offered it to them. And that was the moment when their eyes were opened and they recognized Him as their resurrected Teacher. Jesus Christ revealed himself during the Eucharist but then *"he vanished from their sight"* (Luke 24:31).

This incident was one of the numerous Jesus Christ's appearances to his disciples after His resurrection. In his First Epistle to the Corinthians, Paul the Apostle writes that the resurrected Jesus Christ had appeared to more than 500 brothers (1 Cor 15:6). Moreover Paul the Apostle himself believed that Christ's appearance to him on the way to Damascus was the same appearance as that of Jesus Christ to St. Luke and Cleopas, St. Mary Magdalene, St. Peter, St. John, and St. James. The resurrected Jesus Christ continues to appear to his anxious disciples even two thousand years later because *"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever"* (Heb 13:8). Christ's disciple is the one who encountered the Teacher. Personally. And the Church is made up of this kind of people.

But I have always been disturbed by one thing in this story: for two hours Jesus was talking to his disciples and that must have been an extraordinary speech, full of profound argumentation, solid assessment and bold generalization. But what did the disciples commit to memory? What did they preserve for us? The entire speech had been contracted to a single verse in chapter 24 in the Gospel of

St. Luke. And that is it. The disciples remembered only one thing: their hearts were burning while they were talking to Jesus Christ (Luke 24:32). They did not recognize God in the talkative Stranger. Nor did they identify their resurrected Teacher. They simply did not see Him. But their hearts were burning. They were burning with faith. And only for a brief moment of the Eucharistic blessing, His face was unveiled to them and they saw Him with their own eyes. That was a brief moment of vision and burning hearts. Indeed this is the most important thing. Not words and argumentations, but the personal encounter with God. The encounter that stirs up one's heart, reawakens one's spirit, and rekindles one's faith.

Every one of us is comforted by Christ's words written down by St. John: "*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe*" (John 20:29) because these words are addressed to each of us. We did not see Christ walking on the water, resurrecting Lazarus, and healing the blind. No one of us witnessed His Resurrection, nor were we invited to the mount called Olivet to see Christ's Ascension to Heaven. But we believe in God and trust Him. Why? Even two thousand years later, why do people still talk about Jesus Christ and build churches? Why do young people voluntarily go to monasteries and even give away their lives for Jesus in some parts of this world?

When people ask me why I became a Christian, I answer simply: I had no choice. I am not one of those people who are burning with fire of faith, passionately pray, or furiously preach. I do not even have basic diligence or assiduity. But nothing exists without Christ. There is no life on "other planets." But Jesus Christ is God Alive; He is the Giver of life; He is Life itself.

Let's recall the Gospel of St. John. Here is chapter 6, where Christ says the famous words about the Bread of Life. This is the basis of theology of the Eucharist. Many of His disciples could not abide these words and thus simply left Him. They left Him forever. And Christ, instead of encouraging the ones who remained and strengthening their faith, suggests that they leave, too. So Peter the Apostle pronounces the words and I testify to them every day: "*Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the message of eternal life*" (John 6:68). Where shall we go? There is only the path of Life and the path of Death. Is there any choice? Is there any choice between Life and Death? Life is possible only within Christ. But this truth is revealed to us only through a personal encounter with God.

I have always been moved by a passage from the Book of Kings, where God's appearance to prophet Elijah is described. It is very important to turn up for the meeting with God, when there is only He and I. Face to face. Prophet Elijah knew *whom* he is going to meet, *whom* he is going to see, *whose* voice he is going to hear, and to *whom* he is going to answer. Sometimes it seems to me that if we knew *who* is setting a "meeting" for us in a church, a hospital, or a magnificent forest, we would never turn up there. We would hide from God as we do from time to time, try to forget about Him because it is hard to be with God. It is joyous and great, but hard. To be blind and disbelieve is easier. At least once in a lifetime, every believer thinks about how much simpler life would have been if there were no God at all. It is easier to live when God has never called you by name, appealed to you personally, waited for your answer, or summoned you for His service.

And here is Elijah, going to the meeting with God. He hears a roaring wind that shatters rocks and mountains. How natural it would be to see God in this roaring of nature, but God is not in the wind. A terrifying earthquake crumbles mountains, but God is not in the earthquake. The fire devours

the earth, destroying everything on its way, but God is not in the fire. The Architect of this world, its Creator and Guardian, appeared to the prophet in the breath of a gentle breeze (1 Kings 19:12).

I am often asked how it happened that I, a Soviet schoolboy raised in a family of non-believers, suddenly became a monk and a priest. It is not easy to explain. I did not have life-changing experiences, tragedies, disappointments, deadly illnesses, or unrequited love. It was much simpler than that. During my summer breaks, I loved to spend time in a library. I read books by different authors and of different genres, with no system whatsoever. And one day I came across a book entitled *The Venerable Sergey of Radonezh* by a Russian immigrant Boris Zaytsev. I liked the title. It seemed beautiful and unusual. I started to read the book and could not put it down till I read it all. And that was that very same “breath of a gentle breeze” for me. God set an appointment for me in a library among books and in serenity. That was when I, a non-believing fourteen-year-old boy, decided to become a monk and priest. Why? Because I had never seen anything more beautiful in my life. That was the revelation of beauty for me.

I want you to understand me correctly. That experience of encountering God and summoning for service was not a mystical rapture. There were no voices, flames, flashes of light or emotional eye-openers. I can even say that there was too much of stillness. I did not talk to God or communicate with St. Sergey of Radonezh. But that was the truest encounter. If I may put it this way: I did not speak with God, I looked at Him.

Here is another important notice. When I was already a priest, I found Boris Zaytsev’s book, which I read when I was a teenager, and reread the book again, expecting the familiar sensations. But this time, I found nothing special in this text. There were no new revelations. It was a small and elegant piece of Russian literature. I remember that I wondered what had astonished me in that book back in my childhood. But the point here is not about books, storms, or mountains. I believe the calling for service is the event that happens only once in a lifetime. It is a unique event. It cannot be repeated. It cannot be “ordered”, prompted, or planned.

Beauty is one of God’s names. He is the source of beauty. He is beauty itself. Later I found out that God appeared to many other people in a revelation of beauty. The great Russian philosopher and theologian Father Serge Bulgakov lost faith in his youth and became a convinced Marxist, but once, while travelling around Europe, he saw the Sistine Madonna by Raphael in an art gallery in Dresden. He began to pray and could not stop. God caught hold of the Russian philosopher in an art gallery, where he had never expected to encounter God. Serge Bulgakov heard the calling for service during this encounter and later he became a priest and an outstanding theologian. But several decades later, already in immigration, he visited the Dresden gallery again and saw the Sistine Madonna, but he left the gallery disappointed — there was no rapture as before. Because the point is not in a painting, a book, or a building. You cannot set a meeting with God. He finds you himself.

The other Russian philosopher, Evgenii Trubetskoy, who underwent nihilism in his youth encountered God not in a church, an art gallery, or a library, but in a concert hall. He was listening to Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony and in the beauty of this music, the meeting of God and the philosopher happened. It is important to point out that all these encounters were not examples of traditional mysticism: these people heard no loud and mighty voice, saw no prophetic visions or terrifying signs. They experienced something that probably each of us once felt: a sudden revelation that turns

everything upside down inside: *God sees me*. I walk down my path and live my life under His eyes. What kind of look He is gazing at me with? It is not the gaze of a hunter tracking down his prey, nor is it the scrutinizing look of a just judge who is seeking vengeance. No. He is simply looking at me. He is simply glad that I exist. He needs nothing from me. And this very same selflessness of God's look is indeed the loudest call to service.

But how can this service be carried out? I do not know. I have lived in a monastery for twenty years and I cannot say it has been a tranquil or triumphant time. I have nothing to exhibit. There is no life in my words; there is no power in my deeds. I have determined the limits of my service, which I have strength to carry out. God wants me to exist. I am an ordinary Belarusian monk and I am here. Our brotherhood is very small: there are only eleven of us. There are more cats in our monastery than monks. Father Antonii, the founder of our monastery, was a very simple and humble man (he died in 2014) and he often said: "Follow in St. Benedict's footsteps." Once St. Benedict said to his brother: "Let's go and preach." And they walked down the streets all day without uttering a single word. That evening the follower asked St. Benedict: "What about the preaching?" And the saint replied: "The fact that we, monks, walked around among ordinary people was our preaching". It is very important for them to know that we exist; that every morning and evening when everybody is sleeping or wining and dining, several freaks get up to pray God and ask Him to be merciful toward this wild world. It is important for them to know that even though they laugh at us and occasionally insult us, still there are people who voluntarily live in chastity and virtue, who have given up personal possessions and devoted their lives to God. It is very important that we simply exist.

When I began going to church, it was very difficult to find any Christian book. One old woman gave me a book with no cover. Later I found out that it was the *Ancient Patericon*, a collection of lives of Egyptian monks. I was particularly astonished by one story from the life of St. Anthony the Great. Every week young monks came to him to be edified. They asked him questions and listened to him with reverence. Among them there was one monk who kept silence the entire time. Once St. Anthony asked this monk why he had never asked him a single question and the monk said that it was sufficient for him to look at Anthony.

I know many people who cannot conquer their addictions and it is hard for them to come to the church, but they admit their hearts overflow with joy and weep when they simply see a monk or hear bell chiming or church singing. This is the simplest thing that we can give and share with people. Maybe they would not remember our words, so let our looks convey more.

I spent several weeks in Taizé in 2012. That was an unforgettable time for me. I kept a diary back then and now I reread the entries sometimes to bring back to memory the joy that I experienced while talking to the brothers. The first days in Taizé are a cultural shock for an ordinary Russian Christian: an unusual way of praying and liturgy, strange relationships and communication style, and in particular the obligation, odd for Russians, to talk to people, because Russians cannot talk in a casual and light manner. We are afraid of talking: because if we are to talk, then it is to the bottom; if we are to befriend, then till the very end; and if we are to love, then it is for ever and ever. Brother Roger founded a community which carries out the apostolic ministry — the ministry of reconciliation. And this is a very noble and relevant service. But all this is not the most important thing for me because Taizé was first of all a revelation of Beauty for me. I would repeat the words of St. Anthony's follower:

Brothers, it is not important for me to ask you questions, talk, interact, or share thoughts. — Of course it is undoubtedly important, but the real joy for me is to look at you and see the fire of Beauty reflected from your faces and the fire with which you enkindle young people who come here for edification and prayer. And if you ever have doubts about the path you have chosen or whether you fit it, do not be distressed. Because even if a single man says to you, reciting the brilliant words of Peter the Apostle: *“Master, it is good for us to be here”* (Lk 9:33), then know that your toil is not in vain.