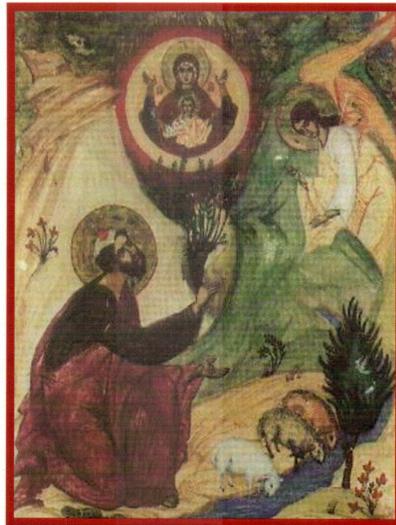


RUGUL APRINS



THE BURNING BUSH

A Monastic Journal

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SHORT HISTORY OF THE PAST THIRTY YEARS

The fundamental philocalic principle *ora et labora*—prayer and work—is the principle on which all monastic communities are founded. Living the Gospel is the embodiment of the Word of God.

Founded on that principle, and at the same time based on the Romanian Orthodox tradition with an uninterrupted experience of over two thousand years, the monastery brought to the American soil, and tried to establish the foundation of traditional Orthodox monasticism, adapted evidently to this place and time.

By the grace of God and under the protection of His blessed Mother the monastery is now 30 years old. The progress that took place in this interval is the fruit of the love and dedication of many laborers.

The same way Saint Andrew the Apostle who preached the Word of God in the area between the Danube and the Black Sea, that later became what we know today as Romania, Mother Benedicta and Father Roman Braga preached the ancestral faith on the American soil. Departed now to the Lord, for Whom they demonstrated an unwavering love and dedication in spite of the martyrdom they suffered, their spirit continues to be present and watch not only over this place of prayer, but also over all those who take part in its life.

The unity of Orthodoxy is the life in Christ. The liturgical and prayer schedule was never interrupted in the monastery. With the help of the Lord and of His Holy Mother, the protectress of all monastics, we struggle to continue this rhythm, for the benefit and the salvation of all.

Monasticism is the special fruit of the healthy life of the Church. It aspires to the same perfection of love Christ has shown, in other words, following exactly the perfection of His life. The acquisition of this perfection means that each faithful person must relive on this earth the life of Christ. The goal of the entire monastic life is to acquire Christ's humble spirit in order to attain His perfection. At the origin of monastic life lies the attainment of perfection, meaning, first of all, the fulfilment of the duty to keep all of God's commandments. And, unmistakably, the fulfillment of His commandments is eternal life. For Romanians, monasticism was present from the beginning of Christian life, continuing today to be a proof of great spiritual dignity, monks having also a reputation of being great stewards and philanthropists of profound generosity. The monk depicts at the same time the joy of being close to God and the sorrow of knowing he is exiled from His Paradise.

Romanians had itiorithmic monks even before the birth of Christ. The Greek historian Herodot, who lived in pagan antiquity, wrote about the

Dacians and the Getae being the most religious of the known world at that time; the center of moral life was in the Carpathian Mountains, which is part of today's Romania. Considering that monasticism represents an aspect of foremost importance of the spirituality and morality of the Gospel of Christ it is certain that it existed from the early days of Christianity. Ascetic life was a constitutional element of Christianity from its origins of the apostolic times because it is an integral part of the Gospel brought to the world by the Incarnate Son of God.

The Christian faith was brought to parts of what is today Romania by the Apostle Andrew, who preached in the region of Dobrogea, along the shores of the Black Sea. The Greek and Roman disciples of St. Andrew crossed over also on the left of the Danube and spread Christianity all the way into the heart of the territory. Monasticism in Romania followed the same stages of evolution as the formation of the political states, having developed in parallel with them. The destiny of Romanian monasticism was inseparably tied to the political destiny of the Romanian Principalities existing on both sides of the Carpathian Mountains. In the Romanian Principalities princes and metropolitans tried to organize the cenobitic life of some monasteries and hermitages, monastic life experiencing over time a series of ups and downs, with periods of magnificence as well as intervals of decline. The monasteries were not only obstacles in the way of the barbarian invaders, but also cultural centers with schools, libraries, printing shops, art studios, and also hospitals and hospices for those in need.

Without doubt, monastic life will always maintain its functionality in the Church; monastics will always have their own place in the Church, the gate through which angels enter and exit, through which the Church assists and participates at the liturgy and the life of the city.

In 1978 Mother Benedicta and Mother Gabriella left the monastery of Varatec and came to the United States to the monastery of "Transfiguration" in Ellwood City, PA., at the request of Mother Alexandra, and were later joined by Mother Apolinaria in 1981. Because Varatec is the largest nuns monastery, with a community of over 400 nuns, established in 1785 and recognized as an admirable school of Romanian monasticism, Mother Benedicta, who was in the monastery since the age of 10, had an extensive monastic experience, and an invaluable heritage of traditional Romanian knowledge. They stayed in Ellwood City almost nine years, and under Mother Benedicta's guidance a complete cycle of liturgical prayer was established and the community grew nicely.

The impetus to form a new missionary monastery in the United States was Mother Benedicta's desire and vision. Fr. Roman was skeptical and so was Mother Gabriella at the thought of going into "pristine territory." They had no money and no idea of where to start, but Mother Benedicta's faith

and determination prevailed. With the blessing of His Grace, Bishop NATHANIEL, the nuns left Ellwood City in 1987 and went to Terre Haute, IN, to set the foundation of what was to become the monastery of the “Dormition of the Mother of God.” The legal formalities had been finalized in March of 1987 and were approved by the Episcopate Council in September. During the stay in Terre Haute they tried to revive a defunct parish, but its survival was short lived. While there, however, the nuns received a great deal of help from the faithful of St. George Antiochian parish and their priest, Fr. Daniel Rohan, as well as other non-Orthodox people with whom they established a friendly relationship. In spite of the fact that it was only a transitory period while looking for a place to establish the new community, the nuns received a great deal of help and many donations from the local people.

At this time friends and acquaintances from the Detroit area in Michigan helped search for a place and this is how they found a suitable place in the village of Rives Junction. The property was an old farm on 47 acres of land, with clearings and wooded areas, a hundred year old farm house, a pole barn and a garage. Immediately upon seeing it Mother Benedicta declared: “this is the place.” They purchased the property on land contract and moved in on January 16, 1988, and in the Spring they had the first Holy Liturgy in the living room of the old farm house with Fr. Marin Mihalache. At the same time they worked to transform the old pole barn into a chapel, work that progressed fast, so that on the Feast of St. Elijah the first Holy Liturgy was celebrated in the chapel that was to be the “church” for the next 25 years.

In a very short time, a relationship between the monastic community and the laity formed, more like the ones existing in Greece, Romania, Ukraine. An increasing number of lay people from various ethnic groups started to help regularly with maintenance, repairs, construction, donations of food and other household items. By the Grace of God and with the help of the many faithful, the monastery started to grow. The road traveled from 1987 to today was sprinkled with hard work, joy and many small and large miracles. Of the many people who took part in the initial establishment and development of the monastery, some rest today in the cemetery, some have moved away, but their legacy will always remain.

In the Spring of 1989, Father Roman Braga, joined the community, and from that moment on the monastery was never without a priest.

In the Epistle to the Hebrews St. Paul tells us: “Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing, some have unknowingly entertained angels” (13:2). Every monastery has a guest house, so in 1990 the first guest house was built but in a short time proved to be too small. The large number of faithful attending the Patronal Feast of the Dormition of the Theotokos

on August 15 prompted the building of an outdoor pavilion in 1993 that continues to be used for the feast day and other large gatherings.

The steady growth of the monastery and the increasing interest for its development, expressed by the Orthodox community, prompted the development of an expansion plan. The main goal of this plan was to add new space that will provide for the monastery's growth. The second goal was to unify the physical aspect of the buildings and the landscape as to provide an ensemble reflecting the faith of this monastic community which is continuous prayer—a continuous dialog with God. The most important monastic activity, according to St. Paul, is “unceasing prayer.” The expansion plan included the building of a new kitchen, a large dining room, a new larger guest house, cells for the nuns, office spaces, a giftshop, a museum, as well as other utilitarian structures.

In 2009 another miracle took place; through the prayers of Father Roman, God has sent us a successor in the person of Father John Konkle who joined the monastery in the capacity of resident priest in 2009—and that was not a small miracle.

By the year 2010 the nuns were ready to start the work on the main church. The design project started actually in 2008 and lasted about two years. The ground blessing took place in the Spring of 2010, and the work started in the Summer of that same year, the Church being consecrated in the Fall of 2012. The architecture of the church is specific to the style of the churches from the Northern region of Romania, especially the monasteries of Putna, Sucevitza and Moldovitza, following the classical monastic model where the church (Catholicon) is placed in the center and all the other buildings surround it. The initial plan of the entire complex, as well as the architectural design for the trapeza, the guest house and the nuns' quarters, was done by the architectural firm Studio Techne from Cleveland, and the design of the main church is the work of the architectural firm Woodard Architects from Jackson, Michigan.

The next two years (2013-2015) were marked by work on the interior of the church, respectively the furniture and other finishes, as well as the iconography, which was finished in August 2016. The iconography, abiding totally by the canons of Byzantine iconography was executed by Mother Olympia in collaboration with Father Theodore Jurevich, a well known and appreciated iconographer, who in spite of his very full schedule, found the time to come to the monastery to help with the outlines of the icons. The community is greatly indebted to Father Theodore, not only for his work and time but also for his pro-bono efforts.

Each monastery has a cemetery, and the Rives Junction Monastery is no exception. The cemetery is situated on the grounds of the monastery on an area of two acres, and is a resting place, not only for monastics, but also

for Orthodox Christians that desire to be buried in a place of continuous prayer. To qualify for a plot in the cemetery the person must be a practicing Orthodox Christian, and at the same time be a member in good standing of an Orthodox parish in the United States or Canada. Those who are interested can contact the monastery for details. The cemetery is not public, it belongs to the Monastery Corporation that is governed by a Board of Directors and it is therefore subject to all the rules and regulations that govern the monastery.

On 7 August 2005 Mother Benedicta stepped over the threshold of this life and is buried in the cemetery of the monastery, followed on 29 April 2015 by Fr. Roman who is buried next to her.

This past Winter and Spring work was done on a new building. The new structure will be used for storage, as a workshop, and it also has a root cellar for fruits and vegetable storage.

With God's help, in the next year we would like to tear down the old pole barn that served as a chapel for the past 25 years and build a conference room and a small chapel in its place.

Once again we pledge our commitment to prayer, continuing our humble intercessions for all of you, asking God to protect you and grant you salvation. ■



THE LITURGY OF THE WORD AND THE LITURGY OF THE EUCHARIST

Fr. John Konkle

Chapter 24 of the Gospel of Luke describes the encounter of the two disciples of Christ, Luke and Cleopas, with Christ as they were on the road to Emaus, and there are two essential elements described in this Gospel: the interpretation of the Scriptures and the breaking of the bread. Our Lord explains the Scriptures to them—He explains what we would call the Old Testament—and then He breaks the bread; He offers them His own body to consume, known to them in the breaking of the bread.

These two elements, of course, are very pervasive in our lives, and they really represent the two aspects of the Divine Liturgy. The Liturgy itself is split into these two parts, sometimes called the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist, or the Liturgy of the Catechumen and the Liturgy of the Faithful; however we divide it there is this instructional time: the antiphons, the psalms, the readings of the Epistle and Gospel, the sermon. There is this time of instruction in which the Word is open to us in various

ways, in which we reflect on it and meditate on it. Then, of course, is the Eucharist in which our Lord offers Himself to us, gives Himself to us to consume.

One of the interesting things, when we think about consuming the Word, or reading the Word—since we live post-printing press, post-Protestant transformation of the world—we often think of the Bible as something that we read on our own. Our exposure to the Word or Scriptures is primarily a private study, reflection, or meditation. But in ancient times, this was a little bit less so; only 10% of the population by most estimates was literate. Many people had memorized significant portions of the Scriptures, especially the Psalms, but still to be exposed to the Word of God, you had to come to Church. You had to listen; it was an oral culture. Commonly people were in church for Matins in the morning and Vespers in the evening. There were often sermons given during those times; many of the sermons that we have from the Holy Fathers were preached at Matins or Vespers, not just at Divine Liturgy.

This was the context in which we were enlightened as to the meaning of the Scriptures. So there is something lost if we think too much of the Scriptures as being a private experience. There is an important aspect in which it is a public, oral experience that we share together. In that context, we have a common terminology, a common discourse in which we communicate with one another. We hear the same readings, we hear the same sermons, and then we can process it from there; we may or may not talk about it with one another, but it is what we hold in common.

What is noticeable to me about this text is the contrast of how these two followers of Christ describe their experience of Christ's teaching with the experience of Christ's breaking of the bread. They say, "Were not our hearts warmed within us when He opened to us the Scriptures?" (Lk. 24:35). There was a kind of inner light, an inner comfort or harmony or satisfaction that things that seemed dark in the Scriptures were now made available to them. But when they describe partaking of the bread and Christ breaking the bread for them, they said, "Our eyes were opened." They could see. It is very different. They do not say that the Scripture opened their eyes. Sometimes we speak that way; we study the Scriptures and we see something we did not see before or they help us see the world in a different way. Surely they play that role, but here it is really the sense in which the teaching Christ gave the disciples was all very preparatory. It was cultivating the ground. It was readying them, readying their souls and their hearts to experience Him, to experience Him in the breaking of the bread. And it was that mystical experience in the breaking of the bread that truly opened their eyes. In the opening of the eyes, clearly this image—not of thinking and reasoning and calculating and contemplating and trying to

understand like we do when we think about reading or studying the Scriptures—clearly this image of having our eyes opened means to have this direct, unmediated experience of Christ Himself, this mystical experience.

So in these two sections of the Divine Liturgy that we have, it is very much the same way. The Scriptures are not an end in themselves. In my years as a Protestant, in the churches I attended, we had a communion service once every three or four months, and maybe not even then. That was not the important part. The important part was a 45-minute sermon and a few hymns on either side of it. The focus was on this, as it were, “warming of the heart,” but there was a complete loss of the sense of this unmediated experience of Christ. It was thinking and calculating and reasoning and all very interesting and important, but somehow all of that kind of reasoning can still keep Christ at a distance. So as much as we need it, and we do need to have it in a way in which it is alive and refreshing, yet also in a way that is not an end in itself. It really is the kind of preparation and cultivation of the heart for that moment when we come to have the bread broken in our midst and to experience Christ in this unmediated way.

Practically speaking, when we come to the Divine Liturgy, it is important to be in the service to hear these words, to experience these teachings, because that is warming our hearts, instructing us, preparing us. It is important for us to be here for that, and it is important for us to see that as directing us towards the Body and Blood of Christ. On the other hand, it is important to receive the Body and Blood of Christ. It is important for us, in a certain sense, not to make ourselves Protestants by only coming to the services and not going to Communion except once a year or so.

These two experiences are woven together in this story of the Road to Emmaus with these two followers of Christ, and they need to be woven together in our own lives in their proper positioning with one another. The Word of God and its explanation and exhortation to us leading us and directing us to receive the Body and Blood of Christ, to experience Christ in this mystical fashion. To have Him open our eyes not just to see the world differently, but to see Him in the world. This is the ultimate gift that He gives us. That our eyes do not simply see trees and birds and the sun and the moon, but they see Christ in the midst of it all. ■

Adapted from a Homily on the Gospel of Luke (24:12-35) given on Bright Tuesday, April 18, 2017.



EVERYTHING WE HAVE COMES FROM GOD

Fr. John Konkle

In the Gospel that was read on Bright Saturday, the Gospel of John (3:22-33), St. John the Forerunner discusses the fact that we do not have anything, we do not receive anything, except that what comes from heaven. Everything we have comes from God. In this context, of course, St. John refers to the people that have come to follow him, to be baptized by him, and be his disciples. They have been given to him by God, which is why he goes on to say in verse 30, “He must increase, but I must decrease.” My followers are going to decrease; my importance, my visibility, my prominence in the work of God on this earth is going to decrease in a certain kind of way, but Christ’s will increase.

This experiential awareness that everything we have comes from God is so important in all the lives of the saints, whether it is our abilities or our disabilities. St. John Chrysostom, was a great preacher. St. Paul, in the First Epistle to the Corinthians (2:1-2), says he is not very good with words “I am not a very great speaker; I just preach Christ and Him crucified.” St. Paul himself had infirmities, a “thorn in the flesh” he called it. Yet these infirmities were really a gift from God because it was through his weakness that Christ’s strength could be shown forth and made manifest.

So whether they are our abilities or our disabilities, whether it is our strength—physical or emotional—or our infirmities and weaknesses, all of these things come to us from the hand of God. The extreme case, of course, is Job; Job was a righteous man, and yet he was given tremendous infirmities—inflicted by Satan, but permitted by God—so that at the very end of this sequence of infirmities he could see God face to face.

In this way we see that everything that is given to us is given by God for our salvation, for our transformation, for our progress in coming to meet Christ face to face, to experience the Risen Christ, not just in a book or in words or in proclamations, but somehow in the depths of our own heart. Seeing that everything is coming from God gives us this freedom to say in various ways in our lives “I must decrease,” maybe in strength, maybe in ability, maybe in the people who come to me for help or guidance or whatever it might be. What is important is that our lives are pointing towards Christ, the magnification of Him.

A second theme of this Gospel is St. John’s description of “this” Christ that we find in the third chapter of the Gospel; he says of Him that He is from heaven; He speaks to us from the things He has seen and heard; He witnesses to the things He has seen and heard in the heavens. Earlier in the very same chapter Jesus is in a conversation with Nicodemus, and it is very

much the same kind of conversation. Nicodemus is stuck with the things of this world, and Jesus says if you do not understand earthly things, how will you ever understand heavenly things? He says it has to be someone who has been there in the heavens in order to understand. Unless someone comes down from the heavens, you will not understand what is there. So Christ comes and He reveals to us what He Himself has seen and experienced with the Father. As St. John says in the first chapter of his Gospel, no one has seen God the Father at any time, but the Only-begotten was in the bosom of the Father. He has revealed Him. He has exegeted him. He has shown forth who the Father is because of the intimacy of His experience. Christ himself speaks to us from His own experience. He says this many times in the Gospel of St. John—I do not speak on my own will, I do not do the things on my own will; I do and say whatever the Father directs me. So it comes from this intimacy of His experience with the Father that He Himself speaks. This becomes the common theme among so many of the Fathers—Sts. Gregory the Theologian, Gregory of Nyssa, John Climacus, Gregory Palamas—they all emphasize that when we speak, we speak what we have experienced, not what we have read in a book or what we have heard in a sermon, but somehow we limit, if you will, or force ourselves to restrict our speech to what it is that is really experiential. It is not that if we do not have any experience we do not have anything to say; it is rather that it is easy to want to sound important, to say impressive things, but when we speak of our experience with Christ, it really seems very simple, very piercing, not argumentative, this is our experience with Christ the Risen Lord—in these days of Bright Week, throughout the year, in the services of the Church, in our own time of prayer, in the reading of Scriptures, and in the way in which God shows Himself to us in the natural world, the surroundings, and in our conversation with other people. God awakens our soul in simple ways, and we bear witness not simply with what we have seen with our eyes and heard with our ears in the physical sense, but the eyes of our heart that God is gradually enlightening, showing us the world in which He inhabits and reveals to us.

These are the two themes from today's Gospel—everything we have comes from God for our salvation. We do not have to hang on to it tightly; we do not have to hold it with a firm grasp. We can receive it openly, with open arms; let Him give to us and let Him take from us as He sees fit for our salvation. And secondly, when we speak, everything we say must come from our own experience. ■

Adapted from a Homily on the Gospel of John (3:22-33) given on Bright Saturday, April 18, 2017.

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His Grace Bishop ANTHONY (Antiochian)

Hosted by

His Eminence Archbishop NATHANIEL

PILGRIMAGE SCHEDULE

Monday, August 14

5:00 pm Light Supper
6:30 pm Vigil of the Feast with Lamentations.

Tuesday, August 15

9:00 am Akathist, 3rd Hour, 6th Hour, Vesting of the
Hierarchs and procession to the Pavilion
10:00 am Hierarchal Holy Liturgy.
12:45 pm Lunch
2:30 pm Mystery of Holy Unction.
5:30 pm Vespers
6:30 pm Supper

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