

CANDLELIGHT WITNESS: OBEDIENCE AND THE MONASTIC OPTION

Fr. Cosmas

People often remark that my trek from the military to monasticism must have been from one end of the spectrum to the other. My reply is always the same: that actually the two are remarkably similar.

I grew up with admiration for both the military and monasticism. I respected the tough discipline and crisply pressed uniforms of the military yet also the quiet mysticism of the ascetics. My dad was a military officer and airborne Ranger and then an Orthodox priest for 30 years. I seem to have followed his path, spending 20 years in the military, achieving the rank of Lieutenant Colonel, and then retiring and joining a monastery at the lowest rank of Novice.

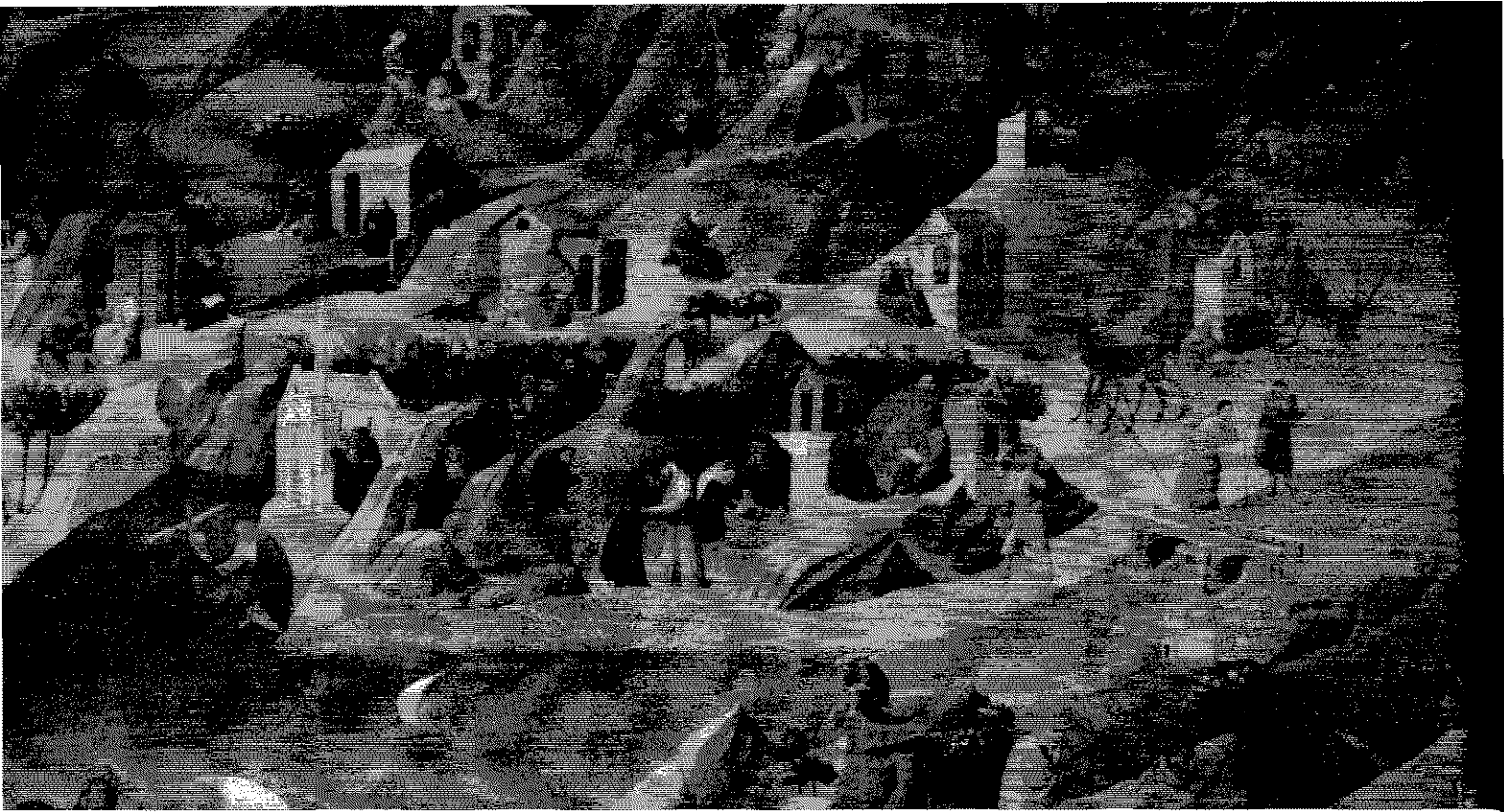
In the military we had parades with special uniforms. We carried flags and had special anthems commemorating specific events. For weeks we practiced and prepared, and then on the day of a given event military duty stood down. So it is with Orthodox monasticism: there are several feast days for which we prepare (mainly by fasting) and on which we sing special music. We carry banners, we wear our best cassocks, and work is set aside on that day.

The military man and monk both live disciplined lives within a regimented routine,

rising early and making a habit of a healthy diet and hard work. Military bases are surrounded by a fence, and access is controlled through a gate. So are monasteries.

And perhaps the most significant similarity is the hierarchical structure: everyone has a boss. But this is also where the two differ most significantly. Both organizations break the self-will of their members, but for different ends. The military breaks a man's self-will by requiring his obedience, and it does this in order that he might become reliable for the good of the unit. The monastery also breaks a man's self-will by requiring his obedience, but for a different reason. The end-goal is not the efficiency of the unit, as in the military, but rather each monk's humility. Obedience inclines a monk to curb his self-will so that he will not put his trust in himself. Being right or wrong is not the point; the point is to yield to someone else. By doing this the monk nurtures humility. This is how a monk draws God close to himself. As the Psalm says: God looks upon the lowly but knows the haughty from afar.

So after a successful military career I decided to exchange the roar of rocket launches for quiet chanting, the smell of jet



Tebaine. By Fra Angelico, 1420. Public domain.

fuel for the aroma of incense, a neatly pressed uniform for a cassock that is faded and worn thin, and the clean-shaven face and high and tight haircut for the long beard and long hair of the Nazarite, whose vows prohibit the razor and scissors.

Our day begins while it's still dark with our quietly chanting the Matins service at 6:00 a.m. This lasts two hours. Matins means "morning" and is the longest and most complex of the daily services. Monks often rise earlier to perform some of their own daily rule. The rule consists of, among other things, daily readings, prayers, and prostrations—all done in solitude and silence. The first half of Matins consists, essentially, of chanted Psalms. We chant our way through the entire Psalter each week and twice a week during Lent. The second half of Matins includes chants about the saint of the day. We learn about the saints because, as a priest once said, "the lives of the saints explain how to live the Gospel."

Our hermitage or monastery is nestled in a small neighborhood in a small town. We have

several facilities on two separate properties. When I walk between the properties before Matins in the dark and quiet—hearing only the crunch of the snow beneath my steps—I'm reminded that most of the town is still sleeping as we begin our prayers. We are thankful to be a part of this small town, to pray for its protection from invasion, plague, and disaster. We ask God that we might be a candle for the community. A candle doesn't force itself on anyone; it is noticeably illumined but quiet. The monk wishes to stay put and not draw attention to himself but rather to God, just as a candle does not illumine itself but something else. Place is important to the monk: you can't be a candle in a place if you are always somewhere else. A tree that is constantly transplanted does not bear fruit.

Work at our hermitage is essential, but time is sparse. For the monk work and prayer (*ora et labora*) are the "standard operating procedures," as we used to say in the military. Once we complete Matins we do our appointed work until noon. Work is interrupted by communal prayer with

the 3rd and 6th Hours. These are short services but all that we need to revector our minds, which easily stray from God during the day. It's a short interruption, a sudden halt to our own desires to accomplish the project we are focused on. And the projects themselves are also quiet. They include writing music, making candles, making coffins, painting icons, maintaining the facilities, mowing lawns or shoveling sidewalks. At our hermitage we also provide, at no cost, music lessons in violin, piano, and chanting. We currently have 20 students and 10 on the waiting list.

Following 3rd and 6th Hours we have our one communal meal of the day. We eat it in silence while the Gospels are read aloud. When you eliminate chitchat from a meal it goes much quicker. The meal and clean-up are completed by 1:00 p.m., whereupon work begins again for the afternoon.

But the workday ends at 4:30 p.m. Our workday is only about six hours long. That which interrupts something else implies greater importance. And so work is interrupted once again with the next monastic service. At 4:30, in advance of that service, there is an hour break to clean-up, have a cup of tea, and have some quiet time before Vespers starts at 5:30. Vespers laments Adam's exile from paradise, and as the day draws to a close we remember and repent of our own sins that separate us from God.

After Vespers there is an hour of personal ascetic time devoted again to each monk's own daily rule before the final service of the day, Compline, at 7:30. This is the only service closed to the public. It is penitential, and we end

each day asking forgiveness of each other. After Compline there is no talking; monks retire to their rooms in silence, which carries through the night and morning until after Matins. Talking is not part of monastic life. As the Proverb says: "Where words are many, the devil is not wanting."

What does a monk do? Elder Barsanuphius of Optina answered this question over a hundred years ago when he said: "Nothing. I preserve my soul from destructive thoughts." Even so do we find the essence of monastic activity. We have no television and no internet. We do not have video games or attend sporting events. None of these things is wrong, of course, but for the monk they are distractions from God.

With all the noise of the world we choose quietude. Given the option of having the latest luxury vehicle, we choose to walk. In an era demanding rights, we yield to another. In a time when many hold others accountable for mistakes made long ago, we grant pardon to our brothers. In the frenzy of science we choose faith. In a culture of busyness we choose stillness. We have determined that those things in life that are supposed to bring happiness don't and that detaching ourselves from them does.

We pray for our souls; we pray for forgiveness; we pray for our hierarchy; we pray for our small town; we pray for those who love us and those who hate us. As with God's help we sweep clean the house of our soul, we pray that God will come reside there as He said in the Gospel. We pray for *theosis*—sanctification; it is after all not the place that sanctifies the monk, but the monk who sanctifies the place.



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