

22. On Monasticism & Visiting Monasteries

While not always counted amongst the Mysteries of the Church, the monastic tonsure certainly has the quality of a Mystery. It is parallel to Holy Matrimony, and is considered to be one of two paths of salvation blessed by God in the Church, along with Matrimony. Certainly, those non-married Christians who are not living in a monastery are expected to be celibate, and for celibate Christians the monastic community provides a strong support for living out that calling. It is important to recognize that monasticism is a vocation — one must be called by God to be either a monastic or married. The monastic state has traditionally been considered very noble, referred to as “the angelic state.”

Commitment to monastic life involves a series of stages. Those believing they have a monastic calling begin by living in a monastery for a while. At some point, as determined by the superior, the aspirant would be clothed in a special garment as a novice. If the novitiate reveals to the abbot or abbess that the novice is suited for monastic life, the next step would be to receive the tonsure as a “*rassophore*.” Along with the tonsuring of the hair, the *rassophore* monastic receives a new garment (*rasson*, or outer garment) and a hat (*klobuk*) with a veil. The next stage is the “Little Schema” or “Stavrophore” stage, when formal vows are taken. Finally, there is a “Great Schema” that not all monastics necessarily receive. Depending on the tradition of the monastery, monastics may receive Great Schema only shortly before death, or earlier in their monastic life.

Monasteries all have a superior, called an *igumen* or abbot in a men’s monastery, and *igumeni* or abbess in a women’s monastery. Male monastics may be referred to as “Father” or “Brother,” and female monastics as “Mother” or “Sister,” depending on rank and local tradition. While most monastics are considered lay-people (albeit specialized ones), some male monastics are ordained as clergy. A monk-priest is referred to a “*hieromonk*,” and a monk-deacon as a “*hierodeacon*.” Some hieromonks are honored with the elevated rank of “*archimandrite*.”

While not all of us are called to monastic life, we ought all to pray fervently for the establishment of monasteries in our land, and for God to call people to monastic vocations. A local church cannot be mature without strong monasticism. While we should not pressure our children one way or the other, neither would we want to hinder them from following God’s call. It is often said that those called by God to monasticism naturally begin to desire that way of life. It is enough if our children are familiar with monasticism through visiting monasteries as they grow up — God will do the rest.

Finally, those of us not called to monastic life should consider monasteries to be spiritual oases that we visit as often as possible. The stillness and unique rhythm of monastic life is a soothing balm for our wearied souls. We can send lists of loved ones’ names to be prayed for, along with a donation to support the monastery. When we go on pilgrimage to monasteries, we should be aware of any rules (usually found on a website these days). We should know the dress code, what are appropriate hours for arriving, etc, and we should bring a gift or donation along with us. And we should pray that God strengthen our monastic brethren, so their prayers can strengthen us!