

Monasticism in Prison. Visible and invisible things. Letter to a prisoner.

From: Priest Seraphim Holland PO 37 McKinney, TX 75070 TO: DATE: Aug 28/ Sep 9/2018, St. Moses the Ethiopian

Dear in Christ: I wrote you a letter already today, but I'm trying to reply to one that was received by me a long time ago, basically a month ago, August 8. I'm sorry that I'm having trouble getting back to people with my letters. Sometimes you guys think I'm ignoring you. I understand that because you're in an environment where people are always ignoring you. I never ignore you. I might not write back because, to be honest, sometimes things are just too much for me, because of my sins. But I always praying for you every day. I have called my bishop and I intend to him to talk to him about your petition as well as some other things. So, I have not forgotten you.

The most important thing we can do for people is pray for them. That way we remember them every day. Even if were out of contact with them, we are remembering them every day. Since I pray for you every day, I bring you to my mind every day, and therefore I never forget you. Of course, that's invisible to you, and I wish I was better at getting everything done.

I think a great skill in the Christian life is at least realizing that there are *more invisible things in our life than there are visible ones*. We tend to think invisible things are more real than invisible things. It's actually the other way around. God is invisible to us, but that is only because of our sins. He is actually more "real" than anything else in the universe, because all things have come into life because of Him in all things are kept alive because of Him. The only thing that is actually true in the universe is God and anything that is like Him. That is what we are trying to become – like God. To the extent that we are like Him, we are alive, to the extent that we are unlike him, we are dead. This is a fundamental principle of Orthodox ascetic theology and of monasticism. We seek the invisible. We pray and we fast even though it doesn't make a tangible difference in our life. It makes an intangible difference that we do not see. We partake of the Holy Mysteries, and we love our brother and we even love our enemy, even though oftentimes there is no tangible improvement that we see. The improvement is in our soul becoming more perfected. That is always an invisible change.

Since you tell me that you want to become a monk, I'm speaking to you in this way. The monastic life is a way of struggling with the invisible. It is a way of intense prayer, and struggle against our passions, and humility and obedience. It is quite possible that that in this life we will see no tangible changes because of our prayer and our struggle. This may be a great temptation to us, but I think God sometimes hides from us our own progress because he wants to see how serious we really are. The way to negotiate the monastic life, and indeed the Christian life in general is to live in the heart. The things in the heart are invisible. If we have true faith, we are not persuaded by anything, but we seek God who is invisible to us now because of our sins that will be fully visible to us in the next life. This is counter to our culture. Our culture wants to see things and feel things and counts only the things that they can see and touch as real. The only thing that is real is God, whom we cannot see and touch right now because of our sins.

You must pray, you must keep the fast as best you can in prison, you must pray for your enemies and for your friends, you must pray for those that are around you that are suffering, even when they are doing foolish things. You must be reading the Gospels, and be reading the Psalter. You must be struggling against any base inclinations that you might have. You must especially be free as best as you can from any sexual impurity. If you will be struggling you do these things then, God willing, Vladyka Peter will consent you being tonsured a monk. It is certainly possible for a prisoner to be tonsured a monk, but it is not common. Therefore, you must do things that are not common. The things that are in the world are common the things. The things that in the world are death. Monasticism is recognizing the things that are dead and seeking the things that are alive. May God help you in this endeavor.

N., all things are possible. God can do anything He wants. You could be tonsured a monk and remain in prison. You could be tonsured a monk and move to a monastery in Texas or elsewhere. Any of these things could happen, or none of them.

You must pray fervently, and beg God to show you which way He wants you to go. I want to emphasize to you that this is a difficult thing that you are asking for, but of course God can do any difficult thing. We don't know the outcome yet of your request. This is something you and I are going to discover. You mentioned another option and that is to have a tiny home and take care of the church, even ours. Certainly, that is also a possibility. I wouldn't say no to anything, but neither can I say yes until we see what God's will is.

I think you must show by your behavior that you are really serious about this. Obviously, I am your spiritual father now, and you must communicate with me often. You must tell me your thoughts and what is bothering you. This can be by letter and in person. If you do this, that I can honestly say to my bishop that I think that you are very serious about this. Even my recommendation does not necessarily mean that you are "in". We must trust in God that everything will happen as it should. I fervently pray that you will be at the liturgy this week, and be prepared for communion and for confession. May God help you in all things.

http://www.orthodox.net/prison-ministry/prison-ministry-letters_2018-09-10+monasticism-in-prison.pdf

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A monk should practice the virtue of fasting, avoid ensnarement by the passions, and at all times cultivate intense stillness. St. John of Karpathos "The Philokalia: the Complete Text" (volume I), by St. Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain and St. Makarios of Corinth, trans. By G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and (Bishop) Kallistos Ware, (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), pp. 298 - 309

And the old man also said, "God saith unto thee thus -- if thou lovest Me, O monk, do that which I ask, and do not that which I do not desire. For monks should lead lives wherein they act not in iniquity, and a man should not look upon evil things with his eyes, nor hear with his ears things which are alien to the fear of God, nor utter calumnies with his mouth, nor plunder with his hands; but he should give especially to the poor, and he should not be unduly exalted in his mind, and he should not think evil thoughts, neither should he fill his belly. Let him do then all these things with discretion, for by them is a monk known." The old man also said, "These things form the life of a monk: good works, and obedience, and training. A man should not lay blame on his neighbor, and he should not utter calumnies, and he should not complain, for it is written, 'The lovers of the Lord hate wickedness.'" E. A. Wallis Budge, "The Paradise of the Holy Fathers," (Seattle, St. Nectarios Press), 1984, p. 135

Angels are a light for monks, and the monastic life is a light for all men. Therefore let monks strive to become a good example in everything, giving no occasion for stumbling in anything (II Corinthians 6:3) in all their works and words. For if the light becomes darkness, how much darker will be that darkness, that is, those living in the world. St. John Climacus, "The Ladder of Divine Ascent," (Boston: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1978), Step26: On Discernment of Thoughts, Passions and Virtue

BROTHER: Behold, through what have the men of old triumphed?

OLD MAN: Through the fervor of their supernatural love, and through the death of the corruptible man, and through the contempt for pride, and through the abatement of the belly, and through the fear of the judgement, and through the promise of certainty; through the desire for these glorious things the fathers have acquired in the soul the spiritual body. E. A. Wallis Budge, "The Paradise of the Holy Fathers," Seattle, St. Nectarios Press, 1984, pp. 264-265

BROTHER: Who is the true monk?

OLD MAN: He who makes his word manifest in deeds, and bears his passion with patient endurance; with such a man life is found, and the knowledge of the spirit dwells in him E. A. Wallis Budge, "The Paradise of the Holy Fathers," Seattle, St. Nectarios Press, 1984, pp. 264-265

Let no one on seeing or hearing something supernatural in the monastic way of life fall into unbelief out of ignorance; for where the supernatural God dwells, much that is supernatural happens. St. John Climacus, "The Ladder of Divine Ascent," (Boston: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1978), Step26: On Discernment of Thoughts, Passions and Virtue

Let us monks, then, be as trustful as the birds are; for they have no cares, neither do they gather into barns. St. John Climacus, "The Ladder of Divine Ascent," (Boston: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1978), STEP 17: On Non-Permissiveness (that Hastens One Heavenwards)