

Entering The Oriental Orthodox Order in the West

The Oriental Orthodox Order in the West offers itself to contemporary men and women in the West today as a path of spiritual wisdom sensitive both to personal need and the demands of our current age.

Typically, association with the Order will come from those who have already established a relationship with one of the groups associated with the Order across North America studying the Wisdom tradition, or from those who have participated in the various Wisdom Schools offered each year.

How to Begin

The process of considering the Order as an aspirant* begins with this question, “Is it essential or even important that I become a member of this Order?” If after reading **Introducing the Order** you have a strong interest in knowing more about the Order and its purpose, and you can answer “yes” to the first question and a majority of the questions below, participation in the Order may be an important step for you.

- Do I have an inner longing to learn and grow?
- Am I hungry and thirsty for God?
- Do I feel drawn to the traditions of wisdom and the visionary teachings of Jesus?
- Am I attracted to the inner tradition of mystical Christianity?
- Do I need the support of a community of fellow pilgrims on a similar path to my own who will support me in the difficult process of spiritual transformation?
- Do I need some form of structure and accountability in order to complete the spiritual journey I have already begun?
- Do I value the whole tradition of Christianity as it has expressed itself through the centuries, multi-culturally—East and West, North and South—to complete my understanding?
- Do I feel myself to be a “world Christian?” (*See The Pledge of a World Christian*)
- Do I long for a fuller understanding of Truth made known not only by my own but perhaps by other faith traditions as well?
- Do I believe that the spiritual body of humanity can accomplish more together than they can alone?
- Do I have a spirit of adventure and am I willing to strike out in a new direction with both the risks and the excitement that this may entail?
- Do I sense that an alternative form of Christianity and its practice needs to be made real and actualized by what I bring to it in our own day?

Statement of Intent

If you are seriously interested in knowing more about the Oriental Orthodox Order in the West, and perhaps associating more fully with it, we ask you to begin a process of prayerful discernment on your own. To begin, explore the various documents and materials that are available through the Order’s website. After consideration of these, if you continue to feel drawn toward it, then, make contact with the

Order and begin a relationship of discernment with someone suggested to you by the Order as part of an ongoing dialogue in which you can become better acquainted with it and the possibilities it holds in store for you. In a written Statement of Intent, express your desire to join the Order with one of its Abbots. In that letter describe in more detail why at this point in your life you feel personally drawn to associate with the Order.

A Period of Discernment

After the Statement of Intent has been received, you and an Abbot of the Order can set a time and place for a personal interview if that is possible. Prior to the interview it would be helpful for you to write out a time-line of your personal and spiritual history to review with the Abbot. After the interview a decision and confirmation will need to be made and signified either verbally, or by a Letter of Recommendation, to begin the process of entrance into the Order. It is possible that the Abbot may advise a waiting period or need for further discernment. However, the Abbot's guidance and discernment at this point is intended to convey important information and our level of expectation about your work, and is not intended to exclude or screen out serious seekers from the Order. It is at this juncture that you become a postulant** preparing to enter the Order.

Preparation for Entering the Order

This period of time preparing to enter the Order may take some time; typically six months to a year. During this time there will be further opportunity to meet with an Abbot, one of the Priors, or a mentor associated with the Order to assist you in the preparatory process. The following is a list of items that will need to be completed before the Rite of Passage and your initiation into the Order. (*For further instruction see "An Outline and Study Guide for Postulants to the Order"*).

- **Reading and Study:** Each postulant will be asked to follow the Study Guide which includes reading materials, a bibliography, the Pledge of a World Christian, and other instructions. It is important that the postulant find or purchase the items in the bibliography and complete the reading or study of each item during the period of preparation. At several points during this period it will be important for the postulant to meet with the person (or persons) assigned as a mentor to review the reading and study materials. This will also give the postulant an opportunity to ask questions based on personal work.
- **Preparing a Rule of Life:** "Guidelines for a Rule of Life" is a document provided on the website. It is essential that during this period of postulancy that you prepare a written Rule of Life, which is specific to your own personal needs and life situation. Your mentor will review the development of your Rule and assist in its completion so that it fully reflects your inner calling and your understanding of your own spiritual practice as a member of the Order.
- **Memorizing Chants and Prayers:** Over the last several decades new and unique forms of chant based both upon ancient tradition and modern modes have come into being. Learning and using these chant forms is an important part of spiritual practice. In addition, because the Order stems from a tradition of eastern Christianity where the Aramaic, Syriac as well as other Middle Eastern languages are liturgically important, you will be asked to learn certain prayers and rites in languages other than English. Assistance, of course, will be provided. Specifically, you will learn to speak and chant the "Aramaic Lord's Prayer," as well as other chants and prayers in

preparation for the Rite of Passage. This will allow you to participate fully in the Liturgy and strengthen the worship and practice when the larger membership of a Priory gathers together.

- **Affiliation with the Order:** During the period of preparation it is important that you become acquainted with other members of the Order through regular participation in one of the studies or contemplative prayer sessions provided through a local Priory, or a Wisdom School. It is recognized that some postulants may live in atypical situations without access to one of the Priors, in which case a personal retreat to one of the Priors is important.
- **Making a Retreat:** Later in the period of preparation it is highly recommended that you make a weekend (or a midweek) retreat at a Retreat Center or House of Prayer under the guidance and direction of your mentor. It is not necessary that the mentor attend the retreat, but it is important that you and the mentor prepare for and debrief after making the retreat.

The Rite of Passage

Following the completion of the period of postulancy a date will be set for the Rite of Passage and your consecration as a Monk in which you will be formally received into the Order and become a member of a Priory. The period before the Rite of Passage is an intense time of spiritual preparation as well. It may be important during this period to make the retreat suggested above a part of your preparation. The following elements are essential in preparing for the Rite of Passage:

- **Certification to the Order:** A mentor, prior, or Abbot will certify to the other members of the Order that you are being recommended to the Order having successfully completed the process of preparation, and are ready to undergo the Rite of Passage. A time and place will be set for this Rite as the admission into the Order.
- **The Pledge of a World Christian:** During the period of preparation you will have studied the Pledge of a World Christian, which will also be a part of the liturgy used during the Rite of Passage. It is important, therefore, that you understand and come to terms with this Pledge as core to the promise you make to the Community before God during the Rite.
- **Responsibilities and Expenses:** Postulants will be expected to purchase the necessary attire for investiture during the Rite of Passage (a Prayer Robe with the insignia of the Order, and a pendant). From this point forward, it is expected that members of the Order will help to support the work of the Order by making some form of annual financial donation and contribute through volunteer efforts as a mentor for others as well as helping in logistics for gatherings sponsored by the Order. Members and friends of the Order will be on an official list to receive mailings and notifications throughout the year concerning gatherings, learning opportunities, and retreats.
- **The Liturgy:** The Rite of Passage (or consecration as a Monk) is an ecumenical Christian liturgy in which your friends and family are invited to fully participate. The time and place will be set so that there can be public participation in and acknowledgement of your entry into the Order. This is an important passage not only for you, but also for them and for the Order. We ask that you bring your full attention to this moment.
- **Choosing an Icon and Preparing a Text:** Awareness of the many forms of prayer and meditation is part of the experience of interiorized monasticism. Iconography is one of the features of eastern Christianity, and represents a visual commitment to a life guided by prayer and inner awareness of the larger community to which you belong. An icon acts as a window into the unseen realm of divine Mystery. In the communion of saints they represent guardians, guides or

helpers on your path. In the liturgy of the Rite of Passage, you may bring an icon for blessing and for your own personal use from that point forward. This means that prior to the liturgy you may choose an icon that speaks deeply to you. (Your mentor can assist you with information about understanding the use of an Icon, literature, and personal practice.) In addition, from your reading of one of the Gospels, you are asked to listen to a word spoken directly to you from the lips of Jesus, and bring that word--a verse, a sentence, or an aphorism--so that, if possible, it may become part of the liturgy.

- **Rehearsal:** Prior to the Rite of Passage there will be an opportunity to move through the liturgy ahead of time so that you are familiar with it and therefore are able to attend with your whole heart as the liturgy occurs.

Continual Renewal and Life-Long Practice for Members of the Order

Members of the Oriental Orthodox Order in the West who have made the Rite of Passage as Monks embark upon a life-long journey in which there are continuing cycles of renewal. It is expected that members of the Order will continue and intensify their life-practice, contemplative prayer, study and inner preparation by following and allowing their Rule of Life to evolve as they continue their vocation in the wisdom tradition. To that end the Order encourages the following opportunities:

- **Annual Retreats and Pilgrimages:** It is hoped that each member of the Order will make an annual retreat of at least one weekend, and more time if possible. Retreats will be provided by the Order for this purpose. In addition, it is recommended that pilgrimages to sacred sites be part of an annual practice.
- **Independent Learning and Prayer:** Life in the Order involves a practice of life-long learning and contemplative prayer. To become a wise being, an individual must become a part of the living stream of perennial wisdom that is available through texts and sacred scriptures. These require reflective reading and study. To be effective, one's life of prayer must be a daily practice, deepening always into greater contemplative awareness and remembrance.
- **Regular Affiliation with the Local Community:** The Order is a network of Pories each of which gathers at regular times for study, reflection, prayer, worship, and practice. One's journey as a monk is taken in community with fellow pilgrims, but also balanced with profound times of being alone in silence, as the saying goes "alone with the Alone." In addition, members who have loyalty to other communions and communities are encouraged to strengthen and support those communities and churches on the basis of their inner spiritual work.
- **Wisdom Schools:** The Order and other communities offer opportunities for intense communal learning, study, worship, practice and prayer. These are typically week-long academies established in different regions of the country and offered at different times of the year. This is also a valuable way to get to know the larger network of spiritual seekers and Pories.
- **Spiritual Direction:** It is expected that members will receive spiritual direction and guidance from trusted guides and directors, and, if possible, give spiritual direction to others on a regular basis. Training is available for those who wish to deepen their practice of this art and skill.
- **Mentoring of Others:** Mentoring means taking those who are beginning or continuing their spiritual pilgrimage, or who need companionship, special assistance or care, and working with them individually or in groups. The practice of mentoring is taught as a skill by the Order as assistance in the work of the Pories.

- **Life Practice:** Life practice is not only the conduct of one's life in its ordinary affairs; it is also about discovering and taking responsibility for a particular vocation of service to the world. These vocations are broadly understood and taught by the Order as one of the four Gospel archetypes: the Way of the Teacher, the Way of the Warrior, the Way of the Healer, the Way of the Visionary. Training in these vocations will be provided by the Order.
- **Renewal of One's Pledge and Promises:** Members of the Order will have opportunities to renew their Pledge and promises at Rites of Passage or annual gatherings of the Order.
- **The Establishment of New Pories:** It is hoped that members of the Order will be led to establish and organize new pories as opportunities arise. A pory is a gathering of members and non-members who are in pilgrimage and who support one another through study, reflection, practice, worship and prayer.

* An aspirant is anyone who “aspires” to enter the Order through exploration, investigation and participation in a period of discernment. Such an exploration may or may not lead to membership in the Order, but by all rights it means that such an individual becomes a “friend” of the Order because of his or her interest.

** A postulant is someone who has begun a formal process of preparation to enter the Order. Postulancy is, of course, a continuing period of discernment.