



December 2015

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Solicitude

The Abbots' Letters of Reflection

The Need for Community

Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am with them.

In the spring of this year, the abbots conducted a survey in which the members of the Oriental Orthodox Order in the West were asked about their spiritual practice. We are still studying the survey but I want to give you a peak into the survey findings in this missive. One of the questions was: **As a monk or postulant in the Order, what do you perceive are your needs in order to establish, maintain, and thrive in your contemplative practice?** The five choices given to this question—community, direction, discipline, knowledge, and motivation—were to be ranked in order of importance. **Community** and **discipline** tied for top needs of the monks.

One of the characteristics of our monastic order is that we do not live in a cloistered community with our brothers and sisters. Our contact with the members of our monastic community is, therefore, limited to varying degrees. While a few of our monks are married or partnered to other monks, most of us

live across town or across the state from each other. Some of us live thousands of miles away. In fact, we span four time zones. Unlike a cloistered community, we do not have the chance to pray, work, and eat together on a daily basis. This fragmentation might be thought of as both a blessing and a challenge for us, especially as it relates to the need for community.

When most people today think of a monastic order, perhaps, they envision monks in a monastery or nuns in a convent. Yet, the first monks in Christianity were not cloistered. Saint Anthony went into the desert alone where he set up his prayer shop in a cave. He was a hermit. His example led thousands of other Christians to become hermits themselves. In their daily practice, they were, for the most part, alone with the Alone. Of course, there was occasional contact with hermits. And, in fact, Anthony eventually complained that he couldn't find time away from the other hermits!

While none of our monks are hermits (at least at the present time), we may have more in common with the desert fathers and mothers than with modern-day cloistered monks. Like our desert fathers and mothers, we structure our own daily office of prayers, reading, and meditation in solitude. Like them, only God knows if we miss our morning or evening prayers. Like them, silence is their companion in their daily office. Like them, we have to travel somewhere to find like-minded souls. I imagine that sometimes our desert fathers and mothers became lonely in their spiritual work and practice. Surely, they experienced discouragement, lethargy, and boredom on particular days of the week or in various seasons of the year. Their calling was not easy. And neither is our calling easy. Why should it be easy?

Building and maintaining community in our Order is a challenge but there are some obvious things we can each do in order to contribute. I'd like to offer these six suggestions:

- Always attend the **Order's Annual Gathering**. Make this one of your priorities each year. For many, this will be our only opportunity to see you. Celebrate and honor this special event!

- **Cultivate spiritual friendship** with one or two other monks who live nearby. Have coffee or lunch together on a regular basis.
- Check in with monks on **Facebook** at least once a week. You can find out about significant life events for monks on the *Anamchara* Facebook page. Last year deaths, births, graduations, weddings, and many other events in our monk's personal lives were posted on *Anamchara*. Make it a habit to learn about and pray for each monk.
- Build ways to **experience contemplation together** through study groups, contemplative worship, or workshops. The Praxis Retreats and Wisdom Schools allow you to know your fellow monks and other seekers more deeply. In doing this, you will naturally invite others into the Order.
- **Stay with a monk.** Many of our homes are also designated as priories with open-end invitations for traveling monks to stay. Many of us have designated bedrooms or cabins where monks and others can stay for a night or two as they journey. Our website lists these priories.
- **Call or email an abbot.** We love you. You are never bothering us when you contact us to discuss personal issues or Order matters. You bless us in reaching out to us.

Yeshua said, *"Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am with them."* So continue to gathering—in homes, in churches, in bars, in restaurants, on the internet, and in the wilderness. As monks in the world—with families, jobs, bills, and commitments—we are scattered across a continent. But remember to keep a lamp lit for your fellow monks—your brothers or sisters who are also alone on the way. In these gatherings, community is made. And, Yeshua is there.

~~ Blake Burleson, Abbot