



Hidden with Christ

The Call to Enclosure

Finding God's Presence and Peace in the East

BY MONK SERGIUS OF THE HOLY TRANSFIGURATION SKETE

It is difficult to pinpoint a particular moment when I knew that God was calling me to the monastic life.

I was raised in a Roman Catholic family. Both of my parents were converts, and I was baptized at the age of 5 along with my elder brother. We attended weekly Mass, which I usually enjoyed, although I can remember times when I was perhaps less than enthusiastic. What struck me, then, was how much “better” I would feel *after* attending Mass. I think that was my feeble way of understanding, as a child, the blessings that God bestows upon those who worship Him and receive Him in Holy Communion.

Although I attended catechism classes, my deepest understanding of the Faith came through informal conversations with my father. I also remember him praying with my brothers and me before bed and sprinkling us with holy water. I can recall being sometimes embarrassed by his enthusiastic singing at Mass, and I remember telling him on a few occasions, “People are looking at you, Dad!” He would usually say, “That’s all right,” or “Don’t worry about it.” He was truly zealous for praising God in worship.

Early in my high school years, I saw an ad for free audiotapes from the Mary Foundation. I soon began to develop a personal prayer life; I consecrated myself to the Holy Virgin by the St. Maximilian Kolbe

consecration, and, by late high school, I had made a personal commitment to attend daily Mass. One of the greatest graces I received at that time was being able to read the abridged version of *The Mystical City of God* by Venerable Mary of Agreda. I started to feel that God might be calling me to the religious life.

I rarely spoke of the thought and only mentioned it to my parents reluctantly when they specifically asked me what I thought I wanted to do after I graduation. But I was praying daily that God would reveal His will for my life.

During my senior year of high school, I had signed up to go on a Christmas break mission trip to Juarez, Mexico. As the departure time neared, I started to feel depressed. I was not able to determine the cause of the feeling—which was unusual for me—so I went and spoke with my father. Almost immediately he said to me, “Perhaps you are not supposed to go on this mission trip.” I remembered being very surprised at the time because I had not in any way connected the feeling with the upcoming trip. I had, in fact, quit my part-time job so as to be able to go. I thought, “My father must be right; I will not go on the mission trip.” So I called and told the organizer—on quite short notice—that I would not be able to attend. Almost immediately, I felt myself again.



During the time that I would have been in Mexico, I saw a short video on EWTN about a Byzantine Catholic community of monks, Holy Transfiguration Skete, in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. I had previously requested information from a few different religious communities but never felt an attraction to a particular community until seeing this video. I ran to pick up a pen and paper to jot down their address, and by the time I returned to write it down, all that was left on the screen was their website.

I contacted the monks by email and within a short time we had arranged for a one-week retreat. Although I had little experience of Eastern Christian worship, I found myself very attracted to the liturgical heritage of the Christian East. During this retreat, I began to learn to pray the Byzantine Office, and while it was certainly an adjustment—and in



many ways felt quite foreign—I was deeply impressed by the haunting melodies of the Galician Chant, the beauty of the Church with its many icons and candles, and the ever pervading sweet smell of incense. The prayer felt very ancient, and I was deeply impressed by the rich theological poetry contained in the religious services. I felt God’s presence there and a great peace.

After the retreat I returned home to finish the last few months of high school. After graduation I contemplated returning to the monastery for a one-month candidacy, but on my father’s advice, I decided to attend Christendom College in Virginia and became increasingly interested in religious and political activism. At the same time, I was still feeling, at times very strongly, a call to the monastic life. I started to have the feeling that I was not called to be out “in the trenches,” but that God was calling me to a life of contemplation. I also started to feel an emptiness, living “in the world,” that I thought only could be filled by a life consecrated completely to God. I felt I could do much more for the world—and could better resist the temptation to become part of the world—if I “left the world,”

and became a monk. I communicated periodically with the monks during this time and I decided not to put off God’s call further. I needed to give the life a try. Two days after finishing my second semester, I returned to Holy Transfiguration Skete.

Candidacy moved into postulancy, and postulancy moved into novitiate. In the Eastern tradition, novitiate is not seen as a time of further discernment. One’s mind should be largely made up, and the three years are devoted to training and preparation for the commitment that lies ahead.

My greatest struggle during my early discernment was trusting that I was truly doing God’s will. I had been praying for guidance for several years, and I needed to learn that if we trust God and truly seek His will, He will not allow us to frustrate His designs. I could see God’s hand in my joining the monastery and during some early periods of doubt, Father Nicholas (my religious superior) told me to pray to God; tell Him that you believe you are doing His will by joining this monastery; and if it be not His will, tell Him that He will have to stop you. I found peace in this and remained in the monastery, asking God that if it be not His will

that He not allow me to be consecrated a monk.

On February 2, 2005, the Feast of the Encounter of Our Lord with Simeon the Just in the Temple, I received monastic consecration at the hands of Father Nicholas. The route of monastic life has continued very much as before, except that I am now committed to “live in the house of the Lord, all the days of my life.”

I mentioned to my parents shortly after my monastic consecration that I was very happy and could not see myself being anywhere else. Some time later, while visiting the monastery, my father told me that he and my mother also had come to the realization that I was where I was meant to be and that they, too, could not see me being anywhere else.

Our monastery is growing; we now number six, twice the size the community was prior to my entry. In a community of this size one finds oneself having many responsibilities even after a relatively short time in monastic life. While this certainly presents its challenges, it also presents many blessings. When we have occasion to travel or make a pilgrimage, for instance, the entire community is able to take part. We wear our habit everywhere we go, and it often draws stares. But as I learned as a child from my father’s response to the attention he garnered from his enthusiastic singing, “That’s all right, we don’t worry about it!”

May God grant His Church an abundance of vocations, and may He grant me, and all in the religious life, the grace of perseverance and true holiness.☪

For more information on Holy Transfiguration Skete, visit:

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