

both the Byzantine and Benedictine traditions. Because of this ages-old correlation, it makes sense to wonder if the somewhat limited growth of native Orthodoxy in North America is not related to the minimal presence of Orthodox monastics on the scene.

To some this will seem a farfetched or absurd notion. But as mentioned previously, too many Orthodox people are largely in the dark about both the nature of monasticism and its necessity for a living Church. Too often it is seen merely as a pious alternative for those who aren't especially keen on the married life, or those who prefer a quiet lifestyle. Often, behind an expressed *pro forma* respect for monastics, there will be an unspoken pity or even mild contempt for these poor creatures who just don't seem to fit into a normal lifestyle. What a vast irony lies there!

For it is precisely the monk or nun who is the truly normal man or woman. It is precisely the monastic who in a society enslaved to materialism is most liberated. It is precisely the monastic who, in spurning the modern world's trinity of Power, Sex and Money, is the true revolutionary and rebel, scorning and trampling on those secular values that hold everyone else in thrall. It is precisely the monastic who, in casting aside every mundane value in order to follow Christ, is the most normal Christian. It is the monastic who proclaims by his very life the truth that every Christian, married or single, must come to terms with – that we are to be ready to suffer the loss of all things, if only Christ be gained. And because Christ has already destroyed the power of death, the true Christian has no fear of death and cannot be threatened by it. And this subtle fear of death so often rules the life of those who would be considered Christians.

Think for a moment how you might change various aspects of your life if you were truly free from any fear of death: not that you would never die, but that you had absolutely no fear of dying and were totally unthreatened by this world's wielders of death. Would you be living the same lifestyle as you are now? Would you be less selfish? Of all the freedoms that come from scorning the power of death is the ability to love fully and freely with that true charity commanded by Christ. To love is to will and to work for the true good of another, *at whatever cost to oneself*. It has nothing to do with how you *feel* toward another – feelings, like the weather, cannot be readily generated -- but how you act toward him. Your actions, if truly free – if truly loving – will proceed from your will, not from your emotions. And if your will is ensnared and enslaved by fear, it will not be free to act in love. So to love oneself and others fully – which is the norm for a true Christian – one must learn and practice to be free of every fear. One must learn to have that fearless courage of the martyrs who gladly bade farewell to everything the world might offer them – one must learn to be truly not of this world in order to be truly a Christian. That is what *renunciation* is about; that is what *mortification* means – dying to vain values and useless things here and now so as to be liberated for love and the fulfillment of joy that God promises to those who love without counting the cost.

That is what the life of a monk – or an oblate -- is basically about. That is the norm against which one measures a true Christian, who can be in the world yet not of the world. It is the goal toward which God summons every one of us without exception. §

## The Normality of Monasticism

- An Oblate Letter from Dom James -

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OUTSIDERS to Orthodoxy – as well as many converts and cradle-Orthodox – are often at a loss to understand or explain monasticism. It is regrettable that, in North America at least, so few Orthodox jurisdictions encourage or cultivate monastic life. This is regrettable, because a healthy monastic life – i.e., the existence of communities both numerous and authentically observant – has always been considered the sign of a vibrant and healthy Church. This has been true in both east and west, with monks of