

There are many books by leading Orthodox theologians and scholars on all aspects of the Orthodox Church and this leaflet series provides some basic information in the hope that it might prompt further enquiry.

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All text in these leaflets is mine except where indicated, therefore any errors of fact or in grammar are mine. I should be grateful to have those errors pointed out so that corrections can be made.

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**"The Orthodox Church.....**has preserved unadulterated the first and most ancient ecclesiastical tradition and teaching, has avoided innovations and personal interpretations of the Holy Scriptures and dogmas of the faith, and is administered according to the ancient synodical system under local bishops in collaboration with the faithful and successive groups of both local and broader episcopal synods, of which the highest is the Ecumenical Synod, that of the Orthodox worldwide. The basic administrative canons, the details of which are regulated according to local needs, have been determined by the seven ecumenical synods. The Church is not managed by regional states in which it resides, although it collaborates in good works when asked to do so.

Within the entire Orthodox Church there is absolute cooperation in goodwill and mutual respect. Perchance minor human problems are addressed successfully through the application of the evangelical spirit."

*Bartholomew, Patriarch of Constantinople, from  
"Encountering the Mysytery."*

Orthodox Community of Archangel Michael  
and Holy Piran, Cornwall.  
[www.orthodoxincornwall.org.uk](http://www.orthodoxincornwall.org.uk)

In the Archdiocese of Thyateira and Great Britain.  
Exarchate of Western Europe and Ireland.  
[www.thyateira.org.uk](http://www.thyateira.org.uk)

Ecumenical Patriarchate.  
Οἰκουµενικὸν Πατριαρχεῖον.  
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Agia Sophia (Holy Wisdom) Constantinople.

Fr.N.08.15

# Orthodox Christian Monasticism (Monks & Nuns)



The Sacred Monastery of the God-Trodden Mount Sinai, also known as Saint Catherine's Monastery. Christian monasticism flourished in Egypt and this monastery was built in the early 6<sup>th</sup> century. It houses some of the most ancient Christian documents including those of the New Testament and is a centre of pilgrimage to this day.

The Holy and Great Martyr Catherine was beheaded on November 24<sup>th</sup>, 310 and her holy relics are preserved at this monastery.

From the earliest days of Christianity there have been people who have sought to live a solitary life and this is what the word *monachism* or monasticism means and from which the title monk comes, meaning both male and female "solitaries" although we have long been accustomed to calling female monastics nuns.

Not everyone of course is called to or suited to this special way of following the Gospel of Jesus Christ, seeking to draw closer to God by a life given to prayer, worship, study and practical labour in vows we know under the familiar headings of poverty, chastity and obedience.

Seeking to enter this way of life the enquirer/novice is tested and it is only when the person is clearly aware that the decision is of their own free will and that there is no coercion to enter the monastic life that he or she will be admitted and become a **rassophore** (robe-bearer). The principle expressions of monasticism in Orthodox Christianity are eremitic, semi eremitic and cenobitic.

**Eremetic** (hermit) are those who live an entirely solitary life but who nevertheless depend upon the Church for their sacramental sustenance.

**Semi ermetics** live in independent cells (**kellia**) which are grouped closely together under a spiritual father and who congregate for worship. This is also called a **skete**.

**Cenobitics** are those who live a full community life in a monastery. From their individual cells they gather together in the monastery church for worship, the refectory (**trapeza** – table) for meals, and for work within the monastery buildings or on the land.

Over a monastery will preside an **hegumen** (f. **hegumenia**) who is presented with a **paterissa** – a pastoral staff of office.

Within a monastery there may be **heirodeacons** (monks who have been ordained deacons) and **heironomks** (priest monks). From **stavrophore** (cross-bearer), some monks progress to the **little and great schema**, identified by their wearing a special vestment decorated with symbols of the Passion, and the Trisagion. Monks known as **geronda** (elders) are those held in special regard for their wisdom and spiritual awareness.



In Orthodoxy there is no multiplicity of orders as found in the Roman Catholic Church, one is simply a monk or a nun. Those who are generally regarded as the founders of Orthodox monasticism are Saint Pochomius (346), Saint Antony the Great (356), Saint Basil the Great (379), and Saint Benedict of Nursa (550). It was Benedict who compiled a "Benedictine" rule which has been largely followed in the Roman Catholic Church.

Whilst monks are usually thought of as living in a monastery it is not unusual to find a monk among the parish clergy and all bishops of the Orthodox Church are monks. Whilst ministering in this way, these will nevertheless always be associated with the monastery of their profession

Although there are many monasteries throughout the world of both antiquity and contemporary the recognised centre of Orthodox monasticism is **Mount Athos**, a peninsula in the north of Greece jutting into the Aegian Sea. This "holy mountain" contains a number of monasteries with many nationalities making up the recently increasing numbers. There are no nuns on Athos and no women are allowed even to visit.

Monasteries have always been thought of as places of pilgrimage and retreat from the business and stresses of everyday life and are still visited by many people seeking spiritual refreshment and guidance.

A collection of sayings known as the **Philokalia** has after the Bible been perhaps the most widely read work among Orthodox Christians. This is a collection of texts on prayer and the spiritual life, written between the fourth and fifteenth centuries by masters of the Orthodox Christian tradition. Whilst written largely by and for monks this "love of beauty" has become a source for all who seek understanding.



Fr. Aimilianos suggests that all Christians can see their own life in the world in relation to the life of a monk:

**"How does a monk live day and night for God? He can only do this to the extent that he is already living in paradise. And this is the proper aim of every human life. As much as we can, let us try to do in spirit, in a spiritual sense, what monks do every day in their monasteries. Let us feel that we are separate from the world. That means we are living in the world, but are not of the world (Jn 15.19). My salvation will be worked out in the monastery. Yours will take place in your home, the place of your daily existence, and in your social life, and through your church. Wherever we are, we will drink from our own wells, and if we remain faithful to the Church, our cups will be brimming with the gifts of the Holy Spirit.** Epilogue, paragraph one - *The Way of the Spirit* – Archimandrite Aimilianos of Simonopetra.



The monastery (nuns) of Saint Stephen, at Meteora on the edge of the Plain of Thessaly, Greece.