

Renew a Steadfast Spirit Within Me

by Marshall Toufic Rose

There are six eastern catholic monasteries in the United States. One of them, Our Lady of Solitude Cloister and Retreat, is in the Eparchy of Newton. In May 2007, I visited the Cloister as an observer between the feasts of Ascension and Pentecost. The Cloister is located on a forty acre farm in the “Endless Mountain” section of northern Pennsylvania.

The life as practiced by the monastic community focuses on public and private prayer and on simplicity of living. Each day there are five public services (Divine Liturgy and the Hours). The community supports itself by operating a farm making goat-based dairy products, and a gift shop with imported icons, books, prayer ropes, CDs, and DVDs, etc. In addition to the Cloister, there is a retreat facility allowing individuals and families to partake in the prayerful life lived by the monks. Finally, the monks provide outreach in their rural setting, instructing catechumens, and assisting all who come their way.

The monastic community is a relatively young one, established in AD 2000. Manual labor focuses both on supporting the community (farm chores) and renovating the existing structures. This adds a second “mission” for the community: a pioneering spirit!

The Monastic Horologion

To understand the life at Our Lady of Solitude Cloister and Retreat, one must look at the Daily schedule:

Sun	Mon-Sat	Activity
7:30am	7:00am	First Hour with Magnification of the Theotokos followed by Third Hour (Sunday only)
9:00am	9:00am	Great and Grand Silence ends
10:30am	9:00am	Divine and Holy Liturgy followed by Sixth Hour (except Sunday)
12:00pm	12:00pm	Dinner followed by rest
	1:30pm	Assigned work (except Sunday)
5:00pm	4:30pm	Farm work

6:30pm	6:30pm	Vespers
7:45pm	7:45pm	Supper
9:00pm	9:00pm	Compline Great and Grand Silence begins

I arrive at the Retreat House on a Friday evening at about 6:15pm. After a quick blessing from the Superior, Hieromonk Angelus, I'm given a Psalter, a volume of the Pentacostarian, the May volume of the Menaion, and a Horologion. At this point, the Retreat Master, Father Gabriel, rings the bell indicating that Vespers is about to begin, and we proceed upstairs to the Chapel of St. Benedict.

During Vespers and the “little” Hours, there are extended readings from the Psalms – the Kathisma. For the first few days, the monks chant these by themselves. Then, they ask me to participate. As I read some of the verses, I catch occasional glimpses of the monks slightly wincing – as they have never heard someone with such a profound lack of tonal quality and complete lack of cadence. (During Lent, Reader Fred at St. George volunteered to teach me how to chant, but I declined his offer. Note to self: the next time Reader Fred makes such an offer, accept.) Nonetheless, each evening we eagerly sing the Phos Hilaron (“Oh, Joyful Light ...”).

After Vespers, it is time for supper. After the blessing, Father Gabriel begins reading from Scripture. (During my time at the Cloister, the readings were from the book of Leviticus concerning the preparation of the sacrifices on the altar. Listening to the verses, I couldn't help but think about the “bloodless sacrifice” offered for us by Christ.) When the Superior rings the bell, we hear the reading from The Great Horologion concerning the feast or saint of the new day, and begin to eat. Finally, there is a reading from a spiritual work.

On days in which meat is allowed, no red meat, only chicken, may be eaten. The monks do not drink wine, but on days in which wine would be allowed, they drink goat milk. With respect to the monastic diet, owing to the small size of the community an oikonomia (“economy”) is in effect: since meals are made with the farm goods produced by the monks, the monks' diet is heavy in dairy

products: eggs, goat milk products (cheese, puddings, and so on) – I recommend the pistachio goat milk pudding. The farm also produces honey and maple syrup, so these feature prominently in the diet as well. (Because the monks labor on the farm with machinery, there is a second oikonomia in effect: hair and beards are kept trimmed.)

I am assigned the “Penthouse cell” in the Retreat House, but a more accurate title might be “Attic cell”. (Actually, you climb through the attic to get to the cell.) The cell gives a good approximation of both a simple and pioneering lifestyle: the cell is 7' by 14' with an angled ceiling ranging from 7' at its height to 4' at the edges. The floor is unfinished particle board and the walls are unfinished wood. There isn't a cabinet; instead, there are six hooks in the wall to hang clothes. There is a stool, a desk with a lamp, a bookshelf, and a nightstand with an oil lamp. There is a 6'-long cot beneath a beautiful iconic crucifix. There are also two lovely icons: above the window, an icon of the Transfiguration, and, on the nightstand, a triptych icon featuring the Theotokos, Deisis, and an Archangel. I'm happy to say that at no time did I mourn the lack of a telephone, television, radio, or Internet connection. This speaks to the power of the monks' vision of a simple lifestyle.

After unpacking, the bell rings for Compline. At the end of the Office, the Superior gives a final blessing and the Great and Grand Silence begins. I now have time to contemplate the readings for tomorrow's Liturgy before saying my bedtime prayers in blessed silence!

The next morning, we begin with First Hour and Magnification of the Theotokos. I have found that living in “the world” there is never enough time to prepare for the Divine Liturgy. There are always distractions both the night and morning before. Not so at the Cloister. After First Hour, I have time to study the readings for the Liturgy, and say all of the preparatory prayers in the Holy Things for the Holy!



prayerbook. Most days, I say the prayers standing in front of a large icon of the Pantocrator which stands outside the retreat house. As I face east, the rising sun begins to scale the treetops behind the icon stand. I am amazed that there is enough *chronos* at the Cloister to enter into *kairos*, because back in “the world” there is never enough *chronos*, never.

Now Great and Grand Silence ends and we leave for the Chapel of the Holy Cross. The building was formerly a chicken coup, but now only the Chapel's exterior suggests that. Inside, it is adorned with a magnificent iconostasis and icons throughout. The iconostasis itself was built using a sculptor's mesh, painted gold, and then backed with curtains in the appropriate festal color. On the iconostasis alone, there are icons of the Evangelists, the Annunciation, and large, beautiful icons of the Theotokos and Christ. Behind the Altar, there are large icons of the Great Theologians.

At present, Holy Cross Chapel is used for Sunday and Feastday Liturgies and Feastday Vespers, so that the Lay Faithful can attend without intruding on the solitude of the Cloister or Retreat. On the day before Pentecost, Saturday of the Dead, we decorate the chapel extensively (green curtains backing the iconostasis, green plants in front, and on the stand holding the feastday icon. We leave the door open during the Memorial service, to be surrounded by the sights and sounds of creation. Finally, the Superior blesses the five loaves, wheat, wine, and oil, and they are distributed.

Labor

There are two periods of labor: assigned and farm work. The Retreat House is nearly renovated so the work here is usually maintenance (cleaning and yard

work). The community does not employ a professional cleaning or cooking staff, although sometimes the Lay Faithful will stop by to lend a hand and donate supplies or professional services. For example, a local resident acts as beekeeper.

I have arrived during an exciting time at the farm. The new barn extension has recently been completed by an Amish contractor, and now houses goats and chickens. The quality of the work is good, but the Amish do not raise goats; as such, a few days of experience has illustrated some design issues in the barn. I help Father Gabriel correct these flaws, making the pens “goat resistant” (“goat proof” pens are infeasible – during my stay I saw a goat hurdle a 4' wall with a standing jump). In terms of farm operations, I am essentially unskilled labor: I change the water, distribute hay, and collect eggs.

The Retreat and The Lay Faithful

The cabin of the Holy & Just St. Joseph is a rustic two-story cabin on the retreat property, next to a large outdoor icon of the Theotokos. Typically, retreatants are married couples and families, although during my visit, two Franciscan friars were on retreat.

Retreatants sleep, bathe, and take their meals in the cabin, but are encouraged to participate fully in public prayer with the monks. This is the monastic community's primary goal in offering a retreat facility: those living in “the world” have tremendous difficulty in finding the time and minimizing the distractions to allow for prayerful life: hence the Retreat.

Within the rural community, approximately half-a-dozen families attend Sunday Liturgy and Feastday Vespers. Under the guidance of the monks, the families hold a regular cenacle for

prayer. The monks do not participate directly in the cenacle; instead, the Superior presented the families with a beautiful icon of Our Lady of the Rosary, written by a Ukrainian iconographer (surrounding the Theotokos are 20 small images of the mysteries), to be venerated during the cenacle.

The monks also instruct catechumens. At present about half-a-dozen adults are being formed. The two-volume *The Incarnate God* series is used. These books teach by focusing on the liturgical year, icons, scriptural readings, and hymns.

The Cloister

Now that the farm is completed, planning has begun for the renovation of the Cloister. (In fairness, the term “renovation” is inaccurate since the current Cloister is actually a farmhouse.) The plans allow the Cloister to house half-a-dozen monks in their own cells, and includes a farm kitchen, expanded gift shop, a large chapel, and a complete enclosure for the monks while still allowing visitors access to the “public” portions of the property.

Life at Our Lady of Solitude is very much a pioneer activity: because of the newness of the community and ongoing construction, many tasks have a “just-in-time” quality about them. However, as the community matures, and as construction finishes, there will be more time for both public and private prayer.

After two weeks, it is time for me to return to “the world” and I find myself not caring what has happened into my absence — mobile phones don't work at the Cloister. (The telephone at the Cloister and the Retreat are located in an office at the far end of each property, and most calls go to the answering machine.) In fact, I am dismayed thinking that, once I depart, I will no longer be able to find the time needed to contemplate before the Divine Liturgy.

For more information on Our Lady of Solitude Cloister and Retreat, please contact the Superior, Hieromonk Angelus at 570/395-0234. If you are interested in either a retreat or exploring a monastic vocation, I invite you to come and see. The monks offer both experiences, and it is a brilliant juxtaposition. For myself, I look forward to my next observer visit this fall.

Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. (Psalms 51:10) †

Marshall Toufic Rose, a parishioner of St. George in Sacramento, CA, contributed the above article

