

## **The Nature of the Order**

### **Defining the Order and its Distinctives**

#### **What is an Order?**

Traditionally spiritual orders of men and women have existed in communities throughout all parts of Christendom. They have been formed to accomplish certain tasks that the larger institution of the Church, aimed at meeting the needs of the masses of humanity, was largely unable or unwilling to do. Orders served the world and the Church in unique ways, allowing its members (monks and nuns) who were called to inner work or outer vocation to dedicate themselves to a life of divine service.

Through the centuries many orders have been cloistered in monastic communities, following strict rules of poverty, chastity and obedience. However, in certain cases, other orders have opened themselves to married and unmarried members and broadened the definition of monastic vocation to include the contemplative life of people in the ordinary world. Such vocations have also existed in Judaism and Islam where contemplative orders have been made up almost entirely of men and women in non-monastic communities. The Oriental Orthodox Order in the West offers itself particularly to those who feel drawn to the inner life of Spirit in the ordinary life of the contemporary world, but is also willing to welcome those drawn to cloistered life.

#### **Why an Order?**

Today there appears to be a need for communities who define themselves differently from the institutional forms with which we are more familiar. Although orders have always existed in parallel relationship to the Church, complimenting and supporting it where possible, the Oriental Orthodox Order sees itself as a new way for contemporary men and women to belong to an ongoing spiritual tradition without being heavily burdened with institutional demands. People today are not only searching for spiritual roots, but also for practical ways of living an inner life that is both grounded in tradition and yet fully present to realities in the everyday world. There is a thirst for authenticity and vitality. As an Order, it is our intention to provide such a possibility in which the encounter with the Transcendent can be integrated with the ageless wisdom we need in order to grow in contemporary society.

#### **Distinctives of the Order**

It is important, therefore, to briefly describe a number of the Oriental Orthodox Order's distinctive features through which it attempts to fulfill its goal. First, it represents the deliberate transmission of a long-standing tradition of early eastern Christianity different from later forms we have grown used to in the West, and because it partakes of both worlds (East and West, the Orient and the Occident), it seeks to combine the unique strengths of each in a balanced way.

Second, the Oriental Orthodox Order supports three important essentials: the transmission of the wisdom tradition, a focus on the inner tradition of Christianity, and stress upon the transformation of human being and consciousness through daily practice. These can be summarized in this way:

**Wisdom:** The Order's aim is to create men and women of wisdom, sages, in fact, who not only know wisdom but authentically live it as a path in its many dimensions. To that end the Order accepts the rich transmissions of wisdom from the past and the present (as well as from transcendent and immanent sources), made available through the mystical traditions of the world. Because we are an Order with roots in the Christian tradition, emphasis is placed upon understanding the wisdom teachings of Yeshua and how they impact his contemporary followers.

**Inner Tradition:** While much of modern Christianity emphasizes external beliefs and conformity to dogmas and institutional rules, the inner dimensions of Christianity were born from the visionary seeing of Yeshua who lived out a form of interiorized Judaism. Although the Order respects the Christian tradition's attention to external realities, it places greater emphasis upon its inner reality, the original vision of Yeshua, and the transmission of that wisdom through Christianity's mystical tradition through the ages.

Historically, much of this inner wisdom was carried into our era by the monastic traditions. However, monastic spirituality has also often stressed a life of conformity to external rules. We believe now that prominence must be given to a new form of "interiorized monasticism" which leaves room for multiple exterior expressions while being deeply committed to inner transformation. The Order believes that any external expression of piety or service flows naturally from inner transformation.

**Transformation:** It is quite clear that in his teaching Yeshua put great emphasis upon the inner transformation of human beings. The primary sources we have today express his criticism of a form of religion that stressed outer religious conformity at the expense of inner change—a reorientation of being and consciousness. Such an inner reorientation, in the end, affected everything about a human (body, soul, and spirit) restored to fullness in the transformative process. This process of transformation as a journey through the states and stages of growth and maturation are at the heart of the Order's work.

A third feature of the Order is that though its roots are in the unique Christian lineage of the ancient Middle East from which it sprang, it is also open to the unfolding of perennial wisdom available through the world's other great sacred traditions. It is clear today that many men and women today are seeking a more universal understanding of religion. They are not willing to remain enclosed in a narrow or superficial religious viewpoint. The Order agrees that clarity and vitality come from openness to universal Truth wherever it is found. While being Christian, the Order expresses kinship with lines of wisdom transmission from other sacred traditions, particularly the Abrahamic manifestations of Kabbalistic Judaism and Islamic Sufism, as well as from Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism. Mystical Christianity must grow and evolve in living relationship with these kindred spiritualities.

Because the Order stresses interiorized monasticism it continues to use monastic nomenclature as an alternative to the ecclesial terminology of the Church. Traditional expressions such as abbot, prior, priory, and rule of life are used but within the Order these venerable realities are sometimes given new articulations and expression.