

How Fares the Hermit?

by Brother Seraphim

Who will you serve: the government, or the Lord?

In our monastery, we recently read *Historical Road of Eastern Orthodoxy* by Alexander Schmemmann, which gave the distinct impression that when the church serves as an instrument of the state, the church will eventually no longer serve as a voice of conscience for the rulers – from the time of the Byzantines, to the time of the Russians. In both the Eastern and Western historical experience, whether Church tries to lead state, or state tries to lead Church, it doesn't seem to work well for very long: they are simply different kinds of things, and when push comes to shove and they disagree, things get bent and broken. Yet, as the Word became flesh, and as God is everywhere present and filling all things, and as every human being is somehow both spirit, soul and flesh, so we always have civil (and not always so very civil) government, and holy (and not always so very holy) church. Sometimes it works well, sometimes not so well.

We aim to live Christian lives, God-pleasing lives. Sometimes it works well, sometimes not so well, even within each one. Parishes, too. Monasteries, too. You and I, too. In this life, so subject to change, things just aren't yet eternal or heavenly – yet, in faith, we persevere, following our Lord.

So is it a surprise to find the same with hermitage? A hermit in the world, or even a hermit in a monastery: it's a “mixed bag,” just as with the Church or parish or any Christian soul in the world: sometimes it works well; other times, not so well. Either way, following Christ, we aim to turn the other cheek, return good even for evil, get up when we fall down, keep our eyes on Christ, and continue following Him, even when He seems absent, even when we're led through suffering, even through the valley of darkness or of death.

Our abbot granted me the blessing to try living as a hermit in our monastery, for which I am very grateful. We agreed that I should go at it gradually, gently. Among the first things I noticed was that people were urging me toward opposite extremes: on the one hand, to live in total isolation from other people, pray non-stop, and live the ideal to the hilt; on the other hand, to interact sometimes with the monks, do chores in the community, talk to visitors and guests who seek spiritual counseling (both in person and by email), give internet classes – and, even write articles for newsletters. On the third hand, in practice, I'm attending the church services with the brethren, receiving meals with them but eating alone, praying privately a bit more than before, resting a bit more (as I age), speaking with people a bit, but refraining from speaking more than before. The examples of great hermits were proposed to me by way of urging more openness to counseling, but the great hermits usually spent decades alone, before doing so – and there's the pesky inconvenience of living in a lawsuit trigger-happy society without being licensed as a counselor, which gives one pause.

So far it's been a matter of “getting my toes wet” as a hermit: encountering some of my own, inward tendencies toward both extremes, and gradually learning how to cope with them; and gently attempting to conform a little more to a life of increased isolation and of constant recollection and prayer: a contemplative ideal which cenobitic contemplative monks hold dear, and which hermits aim a bit more intensely and explicitly to practice. Of course, life still has its ordinary aspects (one still eats and sleeps, does chores, etc.), but one is more mindful of our Lord, who is there, ready to infuse more and more of one's life with his Presence; one yearns to cooperate better, or to kindle that flame when it smoulders, to fan it when it flares: perhaps a

steady gentle flame would be best. One is also more aware than before of one's weakness in the endeavor.

Is it a special, rare calling, to be a hermit? It does seem to be one – but in a way it is not: isn't each one of us called to have a hermitage, in one's very own heart? A place of deep intimacy with our Lord, in a stillness with the Word...?