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*An introduction to Archimandrite Dionysios, Orthodox elder from Mount Athos and a modern mystic. This article is an introduction to an interview with Father Dionysios by Craig Hamilton published in two parts on WRITERsite*

## The Enemy Within

My first encounter with Archimandrite Dionysios came, perhaps ironically, via email. Ironic because, despite the decidedly modern means of his communication, upon receiving it, I felt as though I had been transported back in time a thousand years to an era when the art of writing epistles was a revered and studied form of spiritual discourse. "Mr. Hamilton, dear in the Lord," the letter began, "Rejoice in the Lord. It was a great honor to receive your email of 11 September, especially after the recommendation of our respected, common friend, in my case for a long time, the very wise Father Basil Pennington. Please forgive me, since from the day your email came until now I have been away . . . I will be in Greece, at the Sacred Monastery of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross . . . and will await you there to offer you hospitality for as long as you desire, where we can also discuss all the issues you mentioned to me in your letter." Having written the renowned Christian Orthodox elder to request both an interview for our magazine and advice on our upcoming pilgrimage to Mt. Athos, the legendary "Holy Mountain" at the heart of Orthodox monasticism, I was pleased to receive such a warm and generous response. After a long list of suggestions for my trip, the elder added a few more kind words of respect and appreciation, and concluded with the following: "My soul is in trembling for fear that you will not receive my answer in time."

I had read in the Orthodox texts of the profound humility that emanates from many of the holy elders—men whose life of deep, contemplative prayer and asceticism is said to have removed from them even the smallest seeds of self-concern. But somehow, for all my searching in the scriptures, I had never expected to receive an email quite like this. As I began to type my reply, I had the undeniable sense, even across the fiber-optic pipeline, that the man I had encountered was not an ordinary human being.

From the beginning of our research for this issue, the idea of speaking with an Orthodox elder about the ego had been an intriguing one. For although it is a tradition in which none of us could claim expertise, we were aware that when it comes to defining the enemy of the spiritual path, the Orthodox Christians are perhaps in a class by themselves. To this ancient mystical branch of Christianity, which split from the Catholic Church in 1054, the total purification of the human personality from egotism, selfishness and anything else that obstructs its capacity to reflect the light of God is and always has been the first and final aim of spiritual life. In sacred books with names like *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* and *The Philokalia* (literally "love of the beautiful and good"), Orthodox elders from as early as the third century write with passion and precision about the fullblooded "spiritual combat" the sincere aspirant must be willing to engage in if he or she is to have any hope of defeating the "demons" within that relentlessly attack with ever new and creative tactics. In one of countless such passages in *The Philokalia*, the fourth-century desert monk St. John Cassian writes, "[The ego] is difficult to fight against, because it has many forms and appears in all our activities . . . When it cannot seduce a man with extravagant clothes, it tries to tempt him by means of shabby ones. When it cannot flatter him with honor, it inflates him by causing him to endure what seems to be dishonor. When it cannot persuade him to feel proud of his display of eloquence, it entices him through silence into thinking he has achieved stillness. . . . In short, every task, every activity, gives this malicious demon a chance for battle."

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While the word "ego" itself only appears in more contemporary translations and commentaries, throughout even the most ancient Orthodox texts, there are countless references to the hazards of self-love, self-esteem and the "most sinister of demons"—pride. Considered by Christians to be the sin that not only brought Lucifer, God's highest angel, tumbling to a fiery fate but that also led Adam and Eve to be exiled from paradise on earth, pride is referred to variously as "the mother of all woes" and "the first offspring of the devil." It is also universally regarded as the most destructive and powerful adversary on the spiritual path. As St. John Cassian writes, "Just as a deadly plague destroys not just one member of the body, but the whole of it, so pride corrupts the whole soul, not just part of it... when the vice of pride has become master of our wretched soul, it acts like some harsh tyrant who has gained control of a great city, and destroys it completely, razing it to its foundations."

To combat the insidious ego so determined to undermine our spiritual progress from within, the monks and nuns of Christian Orthodoxy follow a strict regime of spiritual discipline, including silent contemplative prayer, spiritual study, group worship—and often extreme acts of asceticism. In the belief that a life of ongoing self-deprivation and suffering is ideal, these black-robed celibate renunciates regularly forgo food, drink and sleep for long periods in order to purify themselves of "worldly passions" and come closer to God.

In the Orthodox calendar, we would learn, half the days of the year are days of fasting! And upon reading a description of the rigorous daily monastic schedule still widely followed in orthodox monasteries, I was dumfounded to learn that the monks' routine of solitary prayer, work and worship, which begins at midnight, often doesn't end until ten or eleven the next evening. As I kept searching the schedule trying to figure out when they slept, I was informed by one father that it is, in fact, not uncommon for monks to consistently sleep only one or two hours per night.

And then there are the real ascetics. . . .

In cold, barren caves high on the slopes of Mt. Athos (a vast, rugged peninsula dedicated entirely to monasticism), hermits spend decades in solitary prayer, often subsisting on only "a little dry bread and water." In this ancient eremitic tradition, dating back to the first Desert Fathers who in the third century abandoned the world to live the solitary life, ascetic practices are at times taken to extremes of self-mortification rivaling the most austere yogis of India. In the course of our research, we read tales of contemporary monks who consider regular self-flagellation with a "passion stick" to be an effective means of subduing temptation, and others who spent years standing or kneeling in prayer on a high rock outcropping until they became crippled. And while reading story upon story of often brutal ascetic labors at times left me wondering whether the line between self-denial and self-torture might have occasionally gotten blurred, I nonetheless couldn't help but be both humbled and inspired by the lengths to which these men were willing to go in their pursuit of life's highest aim.

For as we would be told again and again, the asceticism practiced by Orthodox Christians is not asceticism for its own sake but asceticism in pursuit of a very specific, divine end - the attainment of which has come to be known as "deification." In contrast to Western Christianity, which under the doctrine of original sin tends to emphasize humanity's inherent frailty and imperfection, Orthodox teachings maintain that it is not only possible - but essential - for human beings to become perfectly transformed, radiant expressions of the Divine. Citing the words and example of Jesus Christ who said, "Be perfect, even as your heavenly Father is perfect," Orthodox monastics aspire to purify themselves of any trace of ego and in so doing become an immaculate vessel for the glory and workings of God in this world. For proof that this attainment is possible—an attainment considered to be the singular purpose of human life and the very lifeblood of all

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Orthodox aspiration—the Orthodox point always to one place: their two-thousand-year legacy of saints, a lineage of holy men and women unbroken since the time of the apostles. Indeed, in our own exploration of Orthodox mysticism for this issue, what had captured our collective imagination most powerfully was the conviction among so many of those we spoke with that there are in fact men and women alive today of the same spiritual caliber as the "God-bearing" masters of old whose lives embellish the scriptures. It was our enthusiasm to speak with such an individual that had generated our far-ranging search for illumined Orthodox elders, a search that eventually led us to Archimandrite Dionysios.

Born and raised in a small town in northern Greece, it was clear from early on that Father Dionysios would not find his home in the world. Coming from a religious family with forefathers in the priesthood, at the age of seventeen he left home to pursue his passion for the spirit at the historic cliff-top monastery of Great Meteoron in central Greece. It was here that he met his spiritual father, the widely revered elder, Archimandrite Aemilianos, and became tonsured into the life of renunciation. When several years later the Greek tourist industry had all but taken over the entire ancient Meteora complex, Elder Aemilianos and his band of young monks relocated to a remote monastery on Mt. Athos and began, along with a handful of other new brotherhoods, to reinvigorate the waning ancient monastic haven with their zeal for the holy life.

Father Dionysios was a bright light from the beginning, known for his unwavering devotion to his elder and for his spirit of selfless giving, shared with all who came to visit their monastery perched high above the Aegean Sea. It was this spirit of generosity and passion for the monastic life that would before long bring invitations from Europe and America and eventually lead him away from the "mountain of silence" he called his home to help guide others along their way. Since leaving Mt. Athos, Archimandrite Dionysios has served at a number of different posts in Greece, Europe and America, eventually spending several years as Abbot of Holy Cross Monastery in Jerusalem. Having recently returned to Greece, where he was given an island on which he will soon build a monastery to house his core group of monks, he is also overseeing a newly founded convent outside Athens, where about forty young nuns have gathered from many different parts of the world. It was there that I had the good fortune to spend a weekend with this radiant elder last fall, discussing both the Orthodox teachings on the ego and the glory and freedom that await those who make it their life's endeavor to live beyond its confines.

*by Craig Hamilton*  
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