

Magnificat

Volume XI
Number 3

ADVENT
1995

News from
HOLY TRANSFIGURATION SKETE

Society of Saint John
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Preparing the Way

All around us the world is waiting for Christmas. Everyone is looking forward to the warmth and joy the season brings, to the joy of family gatherings and the sharing of good times with friends and loved ones. Wide-eyed children anxiously await the day they may open their presents, and merchants happily contemplate their renewed prosperity.

Everyone is getting ready. We make lists, plan parties, buy gifts. We ponder what might be appropriate for each and hope we have not forgotten anyone. Well stocked shops glitter with decorations in the hope of drawing all into the spirit, and we joyfully succumb to the festive mood. Christmas is coming; it is a time to be merry.

Despite its sometimes overly commercial manifestations in our days, this spirit of merriment is not misplaced. The coming of Christ in the flesh is a profoundly joyous Mystery. That God loved us so much that He would become one of us, share in our weakness of body and spirit, and raise us up from our fallen condition of estrangement from Him is indeed cause for rejoicing. Who could fail to be glad at receiving such a gift? Knowing it was coming, who would fail to be prepared?

Thus it is that, long before the current commercial exploitation, the Church established a period of preparation before the great feast. This time of expectancy and of making ready is

called Advent - the Coming - in anticipation of the Mystery we celebrate in Christmas, the grace for which we most diligently prepare. It is a special time of preparing the way for Christ who comes to us clothed in the flesh of an infant at Bethlehem, robed in glory on the Last Day, and bathed in light within our hearts.

In a certain sense, it would seem pointless to make the effort. As Christians we believe that Christ was born into the world nearly two thousand years ago; His birth in Bethlehem we take as history; one cannot prepare for an event that has already happened, one can only respond to its consequences. Likewise, we hold as an article of faith that Christ will come as Judge at the end of time; but we know not the day or the hour, so we must be ready for it at any time; a special period of preparation for that Cosmic Event would seem beside the point, perhaps even counter-productive. As for Christ filling our hearts, should we not always be open to His grace? Why, then, a special time for it?

The Church has a somewhat more realistic view of human understanding. She knows that real faith is much more than a system of intellectually held propositions. To be truly significant to our lives it must be felt, and it must become known experientially.

The various celebrations and festivals of her liturgical year serve to re-present (make present again) to us the great truths of the faith.

We are a filial monastery of Holy Transfiguration Monastery, Redwood Valley, California, an autonomous Catholic monastery of the Byzantine rite, under the jurisdiction of the Eparch of Chicago, and belonging to the Ukrainian Metropolis in the United States of America, which is in union with the Pope of Rome, supreme pastor of the universal Church. We embrace Evangelical chastity, poverty, and obedience, and stability of life, according to the Rule of Saint Benedict and the traditions of the Christian East. In our skete at Jacob's Falls, on the shore of Lake Superior in Michigan's Keweenaw Peninsula, we devote ourselves to a common life of prayer and work for the praise, love, and service of God and for the upbuilding of His Kingdom through the arts.

Through participation in her liturgies, we experience the mysteries of faith in a profoundly personal manner, and they become integral to our very being, part of who we are. More than some didactic dramatization or cleverly devised emotional manipulation, the Church's feasts convey to us a powerful spiritual reality - particularly, if we are properly disposed to receive it.

Advent, then, is not merely a preparation for a celebration, like cleaning and decorating, making a guest list or laying in supplies. Nor is it an attempt to convince us of what we already believe or even to get us ready for the inevitable last days. Rather, its goal is to open us up and enable us to experience deep within ourselves the reality which we celebrate.

Jesus came among us as Man in the tender flesh of the Babe at Bethlehem, the fulfillment of prophecy and the desire of ages, the long awaited Messiah and Savior. He will come again in glory at the end of the ages, the just and merciful Judge of both the living and the dead. He comes continually to fill with warmth and brightness the hearts and souls of those who earnestly seek His face and call upon His name.

The special grace of Advent and Christmas is to make us more vividly aware of these truths, to make them for us intimate and deeply felt aspects of reality. Our plea of "O come, O come, Immanuel!" is at once a remembrance of long ages past, a hastening toward the Age to Come, and the dawning of divine light within us.

As is so often the case, the Church, East and West, emphasizes different - and complementary - aspects of the same reality.

Through carefully selected and arranged scriptural readings, the practical and historically minded Church in the West powerfully presents Jesus as King and Messiah, the Lord of History, Whom the prophets foretold and to Whom we must submit in loving obedience. In her penchant for concreteness, she centers her celebration on the historical events of His birth at Bethlehem, but soberly tempers the joy of her preparation for the feast with admonitions about His coming as Judge.

While not ignoring the events themselves - she reads the same Gospel narratives and poetically meditates on the smallest details of

the account - the Eastern Church tends to look beyond the mere facts of the matter, toward their meaning and ultimate significance. Her celebration of Christ's coming is not exhausted at Christmas with the re-presentation of Jesus' birth, but reaches its culmination some twelve days later at the great feast of Theophany (Epiphany) when she proclaims His manifestation to the world as Son of God at His baptism. She seeks not only to bring us to experience Christ's birth, but, above all, to bathe us in the radiance of His glory and to give us understanding that in Him our fallen nature is restored to communion with God.

Where the Western Church in its Advent liturgy seeks to have us accept Jesus as Lord and lovingly submit to His precepts and guidance of our lives - certainly a noble and holy end in itself - the Church in the East bids us open ourselves up to the light of Christ, to allow Him to penetrate our very being and join our lives to His own that we may come to be like Him in every way and that through us His light may shine on the whole world.

Her principal tool in this endeavor is a fast of forty days which begins on November 15th. Thus, while the world bids us indulge ourselves and enjoy the holidays, the Byzantine Church, ever a counter cultural sign, points out that true joy comes through restraint of our immediate desires. The Church does not impose fasting as a penance for sin, some sort of satisfaction to balance moral shortcomings. Rather, she prescribes it as a remedy for our grasping self-centeredness and as a discipline to strengthen our resolve in a life of prayer and good works.

Fasting is not an end, but a means. By controlling our appetite and denying ourselves some small satisfaction in matters of food, we begin to free ourselves from attachments to the things of this world, and we lighten our burden as we strive toward holiness. What we save by our self denial is all the more we have to share with others. Hunger leaves us with a feeling of emptiness, a longing which makes the coming joy all the more intense. Ultimately, we find ourselves strengthened, more lithe in spirit, and persevering in prayer.

Through our Advent fasting, God grant us a greater share of His love. May He make us know the joy of His Son's coming and fill our emptiness with the brilliance of His glory.

Visitations of Blessing



This autumn we were twice blessed with visits from leaders of our sponsor monastery in California.

In late September Archimandrite Boniface, founder and Abbot of Holy Transfiguration Monastery, Redwood Valley, California, spent three days with us. We had already visited Mt. Tabor, as the California monastery is popularly known, four times in the previous eighteen months, but this was the first time someone from there had come this way. The visit afforded the Abbot the opportunity to see our area and facility at first hand, to observe the realities of life in our current situation, to make insightful suggestions, and to share with us the intimacy of worship in our little chapel.

The time was brief and we were still very pressed with the busyness of the color season, but his visit did allow for more conversation, both relaxed and in depth, than his own busy schedule would have permitted in California. We find ourselves

most grateful for having had the chance to share of his experience and wisdom and to feel his warm, gentle presence in our house.

A week after the Abbot's departure, Fr. Damian, Mt. Tabor's novice master, came for a stay of some ten days. While less official and more informal than the Abbot's visitation, Fr. Damian's time with us was also filled with much discussion and sharing as well as a certain atmosphere of relaxation. We hope occasions arise for other such visits; they are for us a source of true blessing.

By far the greatest blessing of both these recent visits was that of having a priest among us. We were able to celebrate the Divine Liturgy every day they were here, and, despite the erratic schedule occasioned by the exigencies of the Jampot work load, other guests were sometimes present to share in the joy of the celebrations. The memory and grace of these times remain with us still, and we earnestly pray for the day they be regular and frequent events in the life of this monastery.



Future Directions

One of the abiding blessings of the recent visitations is a new sense of direction with respect to our monastic building program.

We have always felt specifically called to our particular spot on the pebbly beach of Great Sand Bay. The circumstances of our arrival here and of our securing the property left us little doubt of divine direction in the matter. Although it was certainly not our first choice, circumstances left us practically no alternative, and we soon came to find virtue in the necessity.

Over the years events and developments have served to confirm the rightness of the place. The immense presence of the Great Lake was a constant source of wonder and consolation during those difficult early years when the outlook seemed so bleak. Our nearness to the highway made it possible to get in and out even during the worst of weather without the necessity of snow removal equipment which was, in any case, beyond our means. And the steady growth of our business at the Jampot seemed to confirm the appropriateness of spot.

Yet, from the very beginning, we were acutely aware of the many drawbacks of the location for monastic life. The highway that was our tie with the outside world and that brought us our livelihood at the Jampot was also a source of disruption to our moments of quiet and prayer and a source of harrassment and irritation at other times, as well. The Lake that provided us so much solace also drew large numbers of sometimes noisy and increasingly curious people to the beach in front of our house and also posed a potential threat to the stability of the land itself. We relished the solitude of winter and built our modest additions with the less than desirable situation in mind.

Above all, we knew that there was just not enough space here for a monastic foundation of the size we one day hoped to be. In the beginning we anticipated being able to grow to no larger than twelve monks at the present site; after that we would have to locate inland, preferably on a height with a view over the Lake. A caption in one of our early informational photo albums stated: One day we will build our

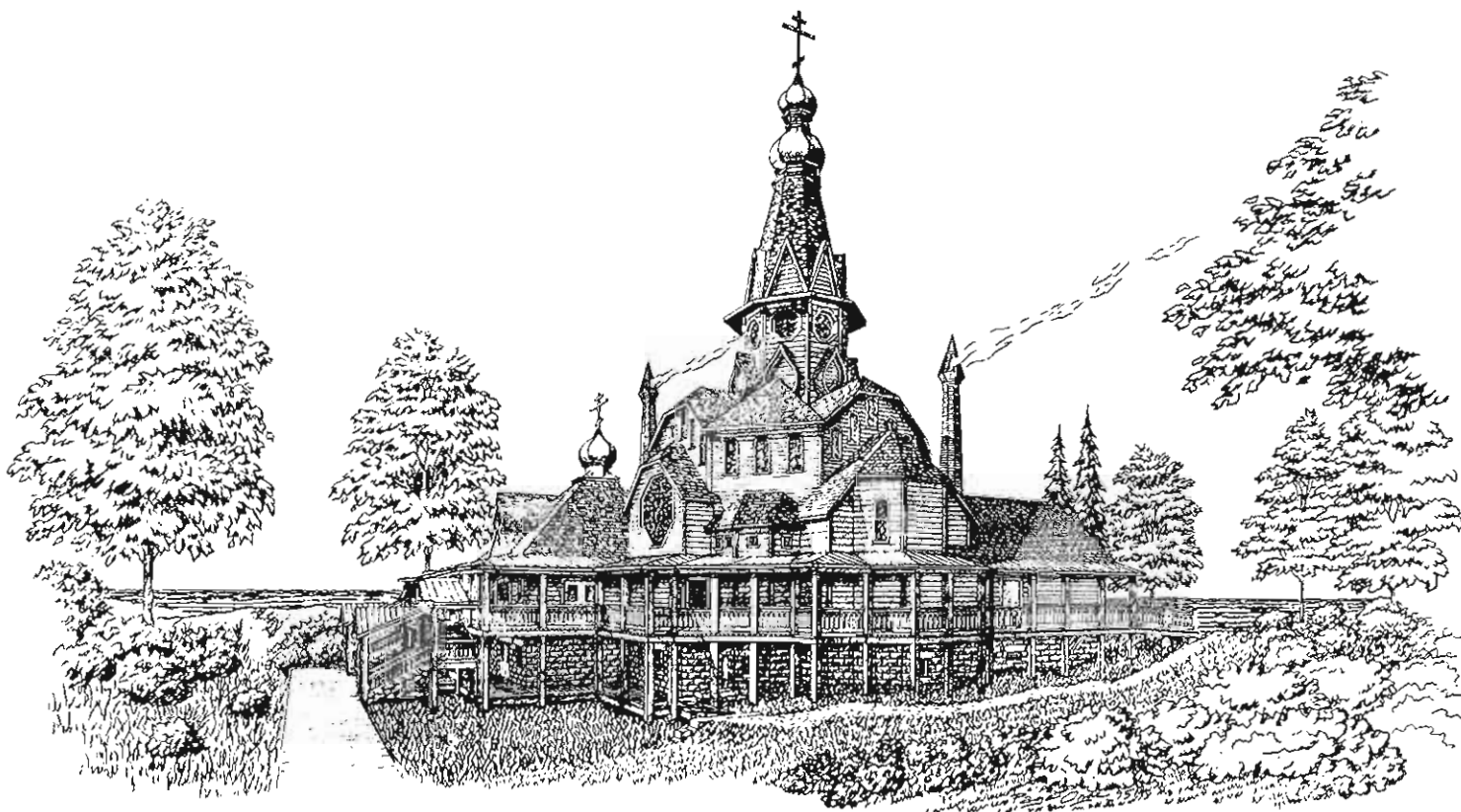
monastery high in the hills; but for now, life on the shore is very good.

Perhaps too good... Over the years, we became very fond of our little spot on the shore. While not forgetting the eventual necessity of moving to higher ground, we elaborated plans for the development of our "temporary" buildings by the Lake. Eventually the concept grew to a complex that would almost completely engulf our little triangle of land on the shore and would require several variances from local building regulations. It would also have been very expensive.

Our subsequent embracing of the Eastern monastic tradition necessitated a total rethinking of the project. A Byzantine church required a different design and, by tradition, had to face East. The Slavic/Byzantine design we devised for the new church would have accomplished both objectives - again with the securing of some variances - and would be extremely beautiful, as well. But it was smaller than the previous design, and it had to occupy the widest part of our site, posing real space problems for the other buildings we needed. Also, because of its proximity to the Lake which often fluctuates in level, we began to consider the necessity of also providing a sea-wall....

But, as the Archimandrite pointed out during his visit, no matter what sort of buildings we managed to erect here, the site was still hemmed in between a highway and a public beach. It could never provide the solitude monastic life needs to thrive. Why make such an investment of time, energy, and funds in what would probably be only a temporary home? We should, rather, concentrate our energy into getting where we were going to be permanently. Somewhat reluctantly, we were persuaded.

So we turn our thoughts to the ridge above the Jampot and are beginning to explore the possibility of acquiring additional land adjacent to our current holdings. Initial exploration indicates a number of potential sites not much farther from the Jampot than our current living quarters. Having seen the views and considered but a few of the possibilities, we have become excited.



Development on the ridge is, of course, a long-term undertaking. Land must be acquired and access provided; there must be a water supply and electricity; sewage handling must also be taken into account. There must be a great deal of groundwork and financial investment before we can erect even the most rudimentary buildings. But we are committed, and we are resolved to work in that direction.

Meanwhile, we cannot neglect our current situation on the shore. We anticipate several years or longer before a move to the ridge can be effected. Certain improvements will have to be made to our current quarters if they are to provide us the necessities of community life in the interim.

Thus, the proposed relocation of our monastery to the ridge is not a change of direction - such has been our long range goal all along. It is, rather, a reordering of priorities. Development and improvement of existing structures will continue as needed, but it will be more modest, more in keeping with the limitations of the property and with a view

toward a subsequent use, probably as a guest house.

This seems a realistic approach to our community growth. While our church and other permanent monastic buildings may have to be put off a little longer, when they do come they can be better arranged and more adequately sized. Moreover, immediately needed improvements, because they will be more modest, will happen sooner.

Our first priority is an addition to house a modest chapel so that our worship may be free of domestic intrusions and that there be adequate room for those who increasingly join us for services. With your help, we will begin next spring.

The Society of St. John is an Ecclesiastical Corporation in the State of Michigan and is tax exempt under section 501 (c) (3) of the Internal Revenue Code. Contributions toward its survival and growth are tax deductible to the full extent of the law.

Heavenly Aid

The building of a monastery is a task well beyond our means. Were we to rely totally on our own devices, we would be lost. But many good people respond to our needs as they learn of them; the work moves forward.

We do not cease, therefore, to make our needs known and to appeal for help. We also continually seek aid from above. Those who have gone before us and now stand in the courts of heaven are powerful intercessors before the throne of God. During the past year we have daily turned to one particular saint for help with the material needs of our infant monastery.

St. Melania the Younger, as she is called in most writings, was the daughter of a Roman Senator named Publicola and his wife, Albina, the Christian daughter of a pagan priest. Her paternal grandmother, also named Melania, (usually identified as the Elder) had lived a holy life and had spent her final years in a monastery. Melanie was inclined to follow her example, and early in life had decided to heed a call to follow God in the life of a maiden. But in the year 397, at age fourteen, her family, hoping to preserve the family fortune intact through provision of a worthy male heir, forced her to marry.

Her husband, Valerius Pinianus, was only a few years older than she and was not at all interested in heeding her pleas to live together in continence. In due course a child was born, a girl, who did not survive infancy. In 399, with much travail, Melanie bore a second child, a boy, who died the next day. Melanie, herself, lay on the verge of death, and Pinian, who was sincerely and devotedly attached to her, swore that if she were spared, she would be free to follow God as she willed. Melanie recovered, and Pinian kept his oath.

Melanie's father, however, demanded that she conform, outwardly at least, to the life befitting her status as Roman matron. Five years later, as he lay on his deathbed, Publicola repented of his harshness and begged Melanie's forgiveness, admitting that he had stood in the way of her heavenly vocation. He bequeathed to her all of his estates which were scattered throughout the western world, one of the greatest fortunes of the time.

Meanwhile both her mother, Albina, and Pinian, her husband, had reconciled themselves to Melanie's new way of life; in time they came to accept it for themselves, as well. But Melanie felt oppressed by the vast wealth she possessed. She knew that the superfluity of the rich belonged by right to poor and naked all around them, that, as St. Ambrose had said, the rich who give to the poor do not bestow alms, but pay a debt. She asked Pinian for permission to give away most of their riches, and he consented. They sold off all their property in the western provinces of the Empire, retaining only their estates in Italy and North Africa for the purpose of founding monasteries. They distributed the proceeds far and wide to the benefit of the poor, sick, captives, bankrupts, and pilgrims; they endowed churches and monasteries as far away as Egypt, Syria, and Palestine. In a two year period they gave their freedom to more than two thousand slaves.

In the years that followed they progressed in holiness and their reputation spread throughout Europe, North Africa, and much of Asia Minor. They travelled to the East, and, after fourteen years together in Jerusalem, Albina died, soon to be followed by Pinian. Melanie buried them side by side on the Mount of Olives and founded a monastery of consecrated virgins on the very spot.

On December 31, 439 AD, St. Melania the Younger died at age 56. Her final words were those of Job: "As the Lord willed, so is it done." From earliest times the Byzantine Church has continued to remember her on the anniversary of her death.

Each day, in our small monastery, we add her tropar to those prescribed for day and season, and we remember her with love.

**You loved the purity of virginity
and supplicated your Beloved with
gracious words.
You spent your fortunes for the monks
and nuns,
and you even built them monasteries, O
blessed Melanie.
Now that you have retired to a heavenly
monastery, do not forget us.**



Ἡ ἉΓΙΑ

ΜΕΛΑΝΗ

Ἡ Ρωμαία

In Memoriam

The monks of Holy Transfiguration Skete gratefully acknowledge
gifts received this past year in memory of:

Helen Bigler

Winchell Brown

Catherine Dennis

Zorabell Glenn

Kathryn Heuvers

Joseph J. Kennedy, Jr.

Emmet Lawless

Mario Sanchez

Christine Stopczynski

*With the saints, O Lord, grant rest to the souls of Your servants
Where there is no pain, no sorrow, no sighing
But everlasting life.*

THE CHALLENGE

The past year has been for us both exciting and gratifying.

It has provided us with steady progress on our course toward full integration in Byzantine monasticism, and at a pace swifter than originally expected. In the loving friendship of our brothers in California and in the kindness and wise guidance of our Abbot and our Bishop, we see sure signs of the Lord's blessing. We praise and thank Him for the goodness He brings about in those who love Him.

Our business also continued steadily in its pattern of growth. We finished the Jampot season with a healthy eleven percent increase in door sales over the previous year. Moreover, the season passed smoothly with few hitches in ordering or production. We seem to be operating more smoothly and with greater efficiency. We are doing more than ever before, and it still leaves us weary, but it makes fewer intrusions on our community life. We begin to get an abiding sense of the serenity inherent in the monastic routine.

Our now greater numbers play a large part in bringing this about. Our novices continue to persevere and do well. They assume

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responsibilities with ease and are progressing steadily in their formation. In them we see the surest sign of the Lord's blessings on our endeavor.

But we have been handed a great challenge, as well. Our decision to build our church and monastery on the ridge places us once again in the position of pioneers. Before us are immense obstacles of finance and logistics. It seems as if we have come full cycle and are once again at the very beginning of this task of monastery building. Only we have never had to face such a mammoth task before!

There is an excitement in this, a shock that keeps us from becoming complacent. No matter how smoothly things seem to go, the Lord will always send some difficulty to test our resolve and make us rely solely on Him. Certainly, in the present case, we have no choice. What is needed is totally beyond our means or that of anyone we know. Only God can raise up the likes of St. Melanie.

We pray He show us the way, and in this matter we particularly solicit your help and prayers.

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