

Impressions of a Visit, Part Two

By Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

When I asked a young man in his mid-twenties what had drawn him to the Orthodox Church, he replied:

“I found spirituality there. I grew up in a type of Christian environment that was structured—rationalistic and orderly—within a society built on laws (codes) and material requirements. But my soul did not find the fulfillment for which it longed. At first, I didn’t even know what that longing was. Later, I discovered it in the spiritual life of the Orthodox tradition, and I gave myself to it completely.”

What is striking to me is that most people who have joined the Antiochian Orthodox parishes in Britain, whether they come from other Christian denominations or from atheism or agnosticism, did not do so because of any organized missionary effort, but through personal discovery. The Holy Spirit, often through the quiet witness of certain believers, prepared the way for this discovery. Personal testimony remains the most effective form of evangelism.

I experienced the universality of the Church vividly at the Parish of Saint Aidan, a sixth-century British saint. This parish brings together British faithful alongside families from Eritrea, Jamaica, Cyprus, Syria, and Palestine. They all gather around the Holy Chalice, becoming one Body of Christ despite their different skin colors. As Saint Paul writes: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).

This living spirituality, the hidden treasure often unnoticed by those born into Orthodox families, is powerfully alive at the Monastery of Saint John the Baptist in Essex. This monastery was founded by Saint Sophrony (Sakharov), the spiritual child of Saint Silouan the Athonite, whom he followed and learned from on Mount Athos between 1930-39. Elder Sophrony absorbed his teacher’s spirit—especially his yearning for the salvation of the whole world—his imitation of Christ’s humility, and his love for his enemies. From Saint Silouan, he also inherited a profound awareness of the presence and action of the Holy Spirit in the ascetic life of believers. This gave

him a rare sensitivity toward human suffering and a unique ability to discern the path of salvation for each person and help them discover it.

I believe this was God's providential work preparing a form of true Christian witness suited for today's Western society. Modern humanity, worn down by endless work, crushed by industrial and urban life, and living in a culture that has dismantled the family and replaced community with individualism, continues to search, often desperately and without direction, for the meaning of existence.

What humans of the West need most is a touch of pure love and a glimpse of the joyful action of the Holy Spirit in their life. This is what shines clearly in that monastic community, which embodies the high spiritual vision awakened by Saint Silouan and carried forward by Saint Sophrony. Joy radiates from their faces. Their warmth and hospitality make every guest feel at home. They treat visitors with deep spiritual sensitivity, and they relate to the Western world around them with both discernment and humility, fully convinced that it is God, not they, who guides hearts to Him. They see their role simply as living the Gospel faithfully and intensely.

What is special about this monastery is that its distinctive character arose naturally from the circumstances of its founding, not from any personal plan of its founder. Such is God's way when He wishes to raise up a new kind of witness adapted to changing cultural realities. The first distinctive characteristic of this community is its communal prayer rule centered on the Jesus Prayer. The monastics pray together for two hours in the morning and two hours in the evening in multiple languages, including the tongues of their guests. They do not ring bells to summon prayer, for they never compel visitors to attend; instead, they allow each person to come freely, moved by their own desire. The second characteristic is that the monastery is a mixed community of monks and nuns living separately but united in prayer and meals, complementing each other in the different areas of work and service the monastery requires.

The monastery, imbued with Elder Sophrony's spirit, stands as a spiritual beacon, a living witness to the joy of life in Christ and a concrete answer to the questions of our confused world. Thousands of visitors come each year. When I asked one of the brothers what work the community does, he said: "We sew garments for the

community and paint icons, nothing more, because the service of hospitality takes all our time.” Indeed, the large dining hall, which can seat two hundred people, is constantly full.

I remembered during an early summer visit (2009) seeing them set the tables twice in one evening to serve dinner for the many guests who could not all fit inside at once.

Today’s believers cannot afford to live their faith superficially or by habit. Inherited customs alone are not enough to bear witness to Christ in an age that urgently needs such witness. Faithful living, and the awareness of the treasure that cannot rust, be stolen, or taken away (Matt. 6:19-21) must take priority for both the individual believer and the Church community. Anything that does not serve this purpose is secondary, a waste of time and energy and, one might say, a betrayal of the Gospel.

Perhaps the greatest gift God has given us through Saint Silouan is the importance of knowing God through the Holy Spirit. Too often, as believers, we appoint ourselves as guides to God simply because we have read something about Him or memorized a few commandments. But the true guide is the one who has been purified and humbled so that the Holy Spirit dwells within him and shines through him.

In the end, God Himself is the only true Guide, and we are but instruments through whom He reveals Himself. God is perfectly capable of drawing people to Himself without us even though we consider ourselves to be His disciples. His Spirit moves where it wills. He passes over us when we grow lazy or distracted by our passions, for He desires that all be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Tim. 2:4). Our judgment will be great if we fail to recognize the value of the spiritual treasure entrusted to us, or the greatness of the calling we have received.

Lord, teach us to know You through the Holy Spirit personally, not theoretically. Teach us to rise above our faults and weaknesses until we behold Your radiant Face. Open our hearts fully to You, so that, before the joy of Your presence, all the pleasures of this world may seem small. Let us taste Your pure joy and make us worthy to be Your witnesses.