

A PROTESTANT STUDENT TAKES HIS RETREAT AT MAR SABBA CONVENT

'As 21st century war jets fly over the monastery of Mar Sabbas nestled in the cliff face of the Kidron Valley in the Judean wilderness little has been altered in the daily life of the monks here over the past 1500 years. I was given the distinct privilege to abide with them in almost every way for three days and three nights, for no Protestants are normally permitted to lodge or worship with them. The foundations of the original ascetic lifestyle remain in tact in this cradle of monasticism; no women, no electricity, no running water, no communication with the outside world; the same liturgy, icons and apophatic theology. Since Constantine made Christianity the official Roman religion in the 4th century the anchorities have been regarded by the church as "taking the place" of the martyrs, as they daily die to self, guarding their free will against falling prey to the passions and vices of the soul. Their aim is to be found in John 17:21, to be like Christ who is one in the Father, in the wilderness overcoming temptations with the wild beasts and the Spirit ministering to them. Their central idea is the pillar of Orthodoxy, a theosis, a deification of self, the transformation of man into the image of God. The monks preserve and spread the apostolic faith through worship, liturgy, monasticism, and missions.

As I arrived from Jerusalem on January 1, 2009 I was greeted at the heavily fortified entrance and given a brief tour of the complex by a Russian monk in broken English, viewing the tomb of the desert fathers Sabba and John of Damascus. St. Sabba founded the site in the late 5th century while living in a cave opposite the existing monastery when in a vision seeing

a pillar of fire found a cave behind it oriented to the east which would become the main sanctuary, today it is called the chapel of Saint Nicholas. The entire site is extraordinarily clean and well maintained with remains visible from the Byzantine period to today. The monks do not use standard Greenwich time but ancient Roman/Byzantine time as in Scripture (...in the 6th hour he was crucified...Luke 23:44...aka noon). The food served to me was to be eaten apart from the 30 monks because I am a Protestant. The food served was a hearty portion of cold stew consisting of no meat but potatoes and vegetables, with bread, salad, fruit and wine. Their daily life consists as follows. The day begins at 2:00 a.m. with a three hour service in the chapel of St. Nicholas. I was permitted to partake in the entire service save the sacraments. The large cave is shrouded in darkness being only lit by candles with 800 year old icons and the bones of desert martyrs decorating its walls. While at Mar Sabba I finished memorizing the book of Revelation and it was in this service that I was first able to tell the entire book to myself from heart. The monks are awoken one hour prior to the service by a loud bell ringing 33 times, then again moments before the service starts they are summoned by the sound of a hammer knocking on wood, reminding them of Noah calling the beasts into the ark to save them from doom. As the monks enter the ark of the church their procedure is to individually venerate various icons by bowing to them and kissing them as well as the 136 skulls of the martyrs. They believe the bones not only retain their story but the Holy Spirit. The service is conducted entirely in Greek with reading from the Septuagint and their liturgy, culminating with the sacraments. From 5:00 to 8:00 a.m. is a time of prayer and rest save for those who prepare the main and only meal of the day served at 9:00 a.m., save for the weekend when there are two meals served daily. From 10:00 a.m. to 3:00 pm is a time of work and study. From 3:00 to 4:00 p.m. is the evening vespers service which is a time of prayer, singing and reading that begins in the narthex of the other main chapel the Church of the Annunciation. The

monks would not permit me to venerate the icons and during the service I first had to stand out of the chapel in the entrance way, out of paradise, but on the second day I was kindly invited into the chapel with them. Following vespers there is a one hour break till the 30 minute evening prayer service starting at 5:00 p.m. which is followed by a time of devotions by the Abbot to his flock of which I was excluded. From 6:00 p.m. until 2:00 a.m. is a time of prayer, meditation and rest.

The three days and three nights I stayed with the monks was everything I imagined but nothing I expected, for seeing something is different than being told about it. The living conditions would be considered good for desert anchorites. The 110 rooms in the lavra are small 11 feet by 11 feet but warm and decorated. Each room has one bed, desk, and lamp with three blankets and a tub of well water to wash their hands and their feet. After the first day I felt very welcome by most the monks, especially the five who spoke some English and developed a real affinity with them. The monks were very curious about America and its new president and considered these days the birth pangs. I was scheduled to stay seven days but only stayed three, for I based my decision on the unwritten rules of hospitality, not wanting to wear out my welcome and the fact that I did not want to invade their high holy Christmas services. This was advantageous as they asked me to return to them and next time to bring some maps of the Holy Land'.

This text is reproduced with the kind permission of Mr. Tom Meyer, the author.

Statement issued from the Chief Secretary's Office