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HOLY MYRRHBEARERS MONASTERY ANNOUNCEMENTS

PATRONAL FEAST CELEBRATION

Leavetaking of the Feast of the Holy Myrrhbearers

SATURDAY, MAY 2, 2026

DIVINE LITURGY 10 AM

LUNCH TO FOLLOW

+

Daily throughout the year, the monastery chapel is open for monastic services and quiet prayer. Guests & pilgrims welcome. Please call ahead to confirm service times.

Our guest room and guest house are open for individuals, families and small groups. Please contact us to schedule your visit. We may be able to arrange pickup from the nearest bus station (Oneonta, NY).

Myrrhbearers@holymyrrhbearers.com

(607) 432 - 3179

We welcome you to spend time here as a guest or a pilgrim!

Cover photo courtesy of Catherine Hamlin, October 2025 guest from Vermont

Holy Myrrhbearers Monastery
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Fall 2025

Dear Friends,

This issue we share a new interview with Mother Raphaela on what it means to be an *American* Orthodox monastery. We also spoke with Dr. Elizabeth Theokritoff at Cambridge about her recent article on the unique role Orthodox monasteries play in the ecological movement.

This spring and summer we've been pleased to host guests from across the US. They've enjoyed meeting our animals, including new arrivals: 5 lambs, 3 kid goats and 8 chicks. See our news, page 12.

Do you need Christmas cards? Check out our online store. A sample of hand-drawn cards available for purchase is on page 14 –15. Sending our cards is a great way to spread the word about our monastery. The online store is open 24 hours, and we also accept orders by phone, mail and email.

Save the date for our annual celebration on the Leavetaking of the feast of the Holy Myrrhbearers on Saturday, May 2. We hope you can join us for the Divine Liturgy and fellowship meal.

Greetings and prayers for you during this Nativity season!

Christ is Born! Glorify Him!

With love in Christ,
The Mothers and Sisters

Holy Myrrhbearers Monastery is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization,
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Q&A with Mother Raphaela

What does it mean to be an *American* Orthodox Monastery?

Our postulant sat down with our abbess to ask about principles behind the founding of Holy Myrrhbearers Monastery almost 50 years ago.

Postulant: *You've said that we're not trying to to copy Russian or Greek monasticism. We want to be an American monastery. What does that mean to you, an American monastery?*

Abbess: Well, that means finding our own way, our own customs, looking at the American tradition, and at American places like St. Vladimir's Orthodox Seminary — of course, that's where we got our start. We draw on that rather than making trips to Greece and Russia, to try to bring that back. We're not going to do that. We look at the American Orthodox Church, at its history, its institutions. But in the basics, it shouldn't make much difference. We should be here to pray and work out our own salvation. That's the main point of a monastery.

Postulant: *For example, we keep the monastic hours, according to the Orthodox Horologian. But the language? I know you specifically wanted the services to be in English, and not just English, but ...*

Abbess: A good colloquial English, yes. Praying in English at all was radical at that time, in the late 1970s. We were living at the OCA Chancery and they encouraged our work to make a readable English version of the service books, adapting from other translations.

Postulant: *But without "thee" and "thou."*

"Christ our God, at every season and every hour, in heaven and on earth, You are worshipped and glorified."

Abbess: Right. Modern English. It's hard to pray in a language you don't understand. Or in a language you know but still don't understand. But we don't try to use slang, there's a balance there.

Postulant: *Tell me about the music that we sing in the chapel. It's from all over, not just Slavic melodies. There's Serbian, Bulgarian, Alaskan, even Gregorian chant. How did you put it together?*

Abbess: We visited various monasteries, asked for music, and chose what we liked. Our intent was always to have music from multiple cultures. We're an American monastery, and that means drawing from all traditions, not just one. We sing in English, but the music can be from different countries. And people from different traditions can feel home at home here. For example, we try to match our response melodies to the background of the serving priest, say, Carpatho-Russian.

Postulant: *And even at our daily Vespers, we sing from multiple traditions. So if we have nuns here from different backgrounds, they could each hear something familiar.*

Abbess: We've inherited a rich tradition, so why narrow it down?

Postulant: *And the architecture of buildings? We look like the nearby farmhouses. You didn't try to build an ornate church with gold domes.*

Abbess: No! (laughs) The style of our monastery building is plain. We wanted it to fit in here in rural Upstate New York. We didn't want it to stand out. If you want that, there are other monasteries to go to. So we're just trying to fit in and be part of the landscape. That's important for an American monastery, I think. +

From the Orthodox Prayer of the Hours

Keeping This Place:
An Interview with Dr. Elizabeth Theokritoff

Dr. Elizabeth Theokritoff, author and scholar at the Institute of Orthodox Christian Studies at Cambridge, is a long-time friend of our community. She and her late husband George prepared a "Guide to the Pilgrim Nature Trails at Holy Myrrhbearers Monastery." She also planted many of the bulbs that now come up each spring. We spoke to her about her recent article, "Keeping This Place: Contemplative Vision and Ecological Living as Christian Witness: An Orthodox View." During the video interview, she showed off a wool rug in her office, woven from yarn from our sheep Bluebell and Smisko.

A monk, seemingly idle, is challenged: "What are you doing here?" And he replies, "I am keeping this place."

HMM: *Your article tells a story: A monk, seemingly idle, is challenged: "What are you doing here?" And he replies, "I am keeping this place." This sounds familiar to us at Holy Myrrhbearers, where much of our attention is on the fields and gardens, sheep and goats, chickens and cats… But your main claim may surprise some people, that "monastic communities … are the epicenter of Orthodox ecological living today." Why do you say this?*

ETh: Simply, in most places monasteries are the only church institutions that set an example of living in a way that makes environmental sense: taking only what they need, working respectfully with the other creatures, animate and inanimate, on whom their everyday life depends. Some monasteries are not keen on the new-fangled language of "environmentalism"; they see themselves as simply living and working in the traditional way, as of course they are. That in itself sets a striking and counter-cultural example in the 21st century. But it is also true that when in the 1980s and '90s people started talking about an environmental crisis and how the Orthodox Churches should respond, it was monastic communities above all that saw the point: that "environmental" actions are not simply something we undertake as an obligation, to be responsible citizens, but the way we live our theology in daily life. The Ormylia Project in northern Greece was probably the

earliest example, going over to organic farming and serving as a model and source of technical advice for local farmers. Chrysopigi in western Crete has a very active Environmental Education Centre, set on a mountainside that is like a little paradise; a habitat for many endemic plants, some very rare, dotted with cave chapels where hermits once lived. In this conservation area, there are completely new monastic buildings – which look as if they have grown out of the rock. It is an extraordinary affirmation that humans really can share and contribute in their own unique way to the natural landscape: we are not doomed always to be destroyers. Then Holy Forerunner monastery, near Larisa, is an outstanding example of "circular economy", and among other things grows many heritage varieties of vegetables in order to harvest and distribute the seeds.

HMM: *Monasteries, in their intentional isolation, are often considered to have little impact on society, so isn't it counter-intuitive that they would have a special mission related to the environment?*

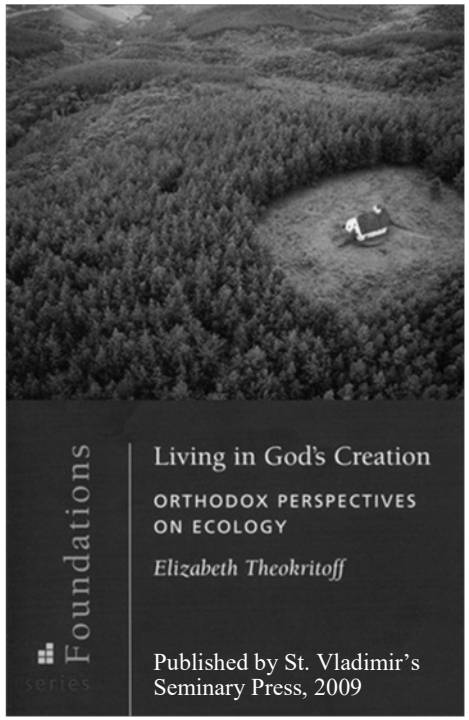
ETh: I think a lot of people today, young people especially, are frustrated by endless words that don't translate into action; hence the importance of example. In the Orthodox Church, it has to be said that there is a shocking gap between the profoundly moving, inspiring and beautiful way in which hierarchs and theologians talk about our vision of all creation in its relationship to God, and the attitudes and thinking typical of parishes, which largely seem to take their cue from the surrounding society in environmental matters. I know that monasteries don't set out to make a statement and have an influence; but people seek them out even so, and it seems to me that monasteries often have quite a profound influence on the local Orthodox community, not least by their example of how to live our faith, our theology, in every facet of life. I talked about the importance of going beyond words, to action; but the monastic life also teaches us the importance of going beyond activism. Activism has a place; holding governments and powerful businesses to account, for instance, can be a responsible way to use the power that Christians "in the world"

Monastic communities are the epicenter of Orthodox ecological living today.

have as citizens of democracies. But ultimately, shouting at other people for doing the wrong thing cannot be a substitute for conforming our own lives so that they speak wordlessly the faith that we profess.

HMM: *You mention that the Orthodox monastic approach to the "sacredness" of the earth can be "a powerful witness to 'post-Christian' spiritual seekers" who care deeply about the environment. Orthodox parishes across the country are seeing a surge in catechumens. Here at Holy Myrrhbearers, increasing numbers of people (including catechumens and inquirers) have been reaching out to visit, and they are thrilled to spend time in nature and with our animals. Could some of these trends be related to seekers coming "through the creation to the Creator" as you describe?*

ETh: Yes, that is exactly what I had in mind. For many people today, the natural world is their portal to awe, wonder, and a sense of humility in the face of something immeasurably greater than themselves. It might be the wonders of astrophysics, the amazing world of fungi or a sequinned spider's web on a misty day – the point in that they encounter this sense of the "transcendent" in/through creation. And the tragedy is that too often, if they have an intuition of a spiritual something beyond nature itself and want to explore it further, they don't even think of looking for it in the Christian tradition; they have an unexamined belief that the two paths are mutually exclusive. So when they are introduced to a Christian way of life that incorporates our relationship with the natural world, as a world of fellow-servants of the Lord – it is not surprising that they would be thrilled.



Another thing that converts to Orthodoxy are sometimes looking for is a sense of rootedness, connection with place. This rings alarm bells among some Orthodox, because they are aware how easily connection with place can slide into an exclusive and confrontational nativism or nationalism. That sort of tendency has deep roots in our animal nature: the instinct is to defend our territory. Monasteries, on the other hand, give us an example of a connection with place that is "not according to the flesh". It is love and care for the place that God has appointed to contribute to one's sanctification and be sanctified in turn – not a place that is "mine". This year, I have had the blessing of visiting two holy islands – first Iona, off the west coast of Scotland, and then Patmos. It is striking to reflect that both these palpably holy places were sanctified in the first instance by saints – St. Columba and St. John the Theologian – for whom it was a place of exile.

HMM: *In your own visits to monasteries, you come both as Orthodox pilgrim and as a scholar. Can you share some of your experiences that contributed to your theological understanding? How do you see the Orthodox ecological witness active at American monasteries like ours?*

ETh: Talking about formative experiences is difficult, because the teaching, the formation is very subtle; it may be decades later, if at all, that you realise how you have been shaped by spending time in a particular community. Archbishop Alexander of Dallas has described this brilliantly in some remarkable talks about his Elder, Aimilianos of Simonopetra – who was also the founder and elder of the Ormylia, and one of the pioneers of ecological involvement in his monasteries.

Monasteries, rural ones especially, provide a living example of an integrated way of life. Not of course a life where everything is perfect harmony; but one with a seamless interface between material and spiritual life, prayer and worship and daily chores. This is very much the way most people would have lived in their villages until a couple of generations ago. But when you think of it, it also connects with the understanding of monasticism as "the angelic life". The angels who are precisely messengers, ministering spirits, also join in the triumphal hymn; but it seems to me not to make much sense to think of them as singing praises to God "in their spare time". Their ceaseless ministrations must **be** their never-silent hymn.

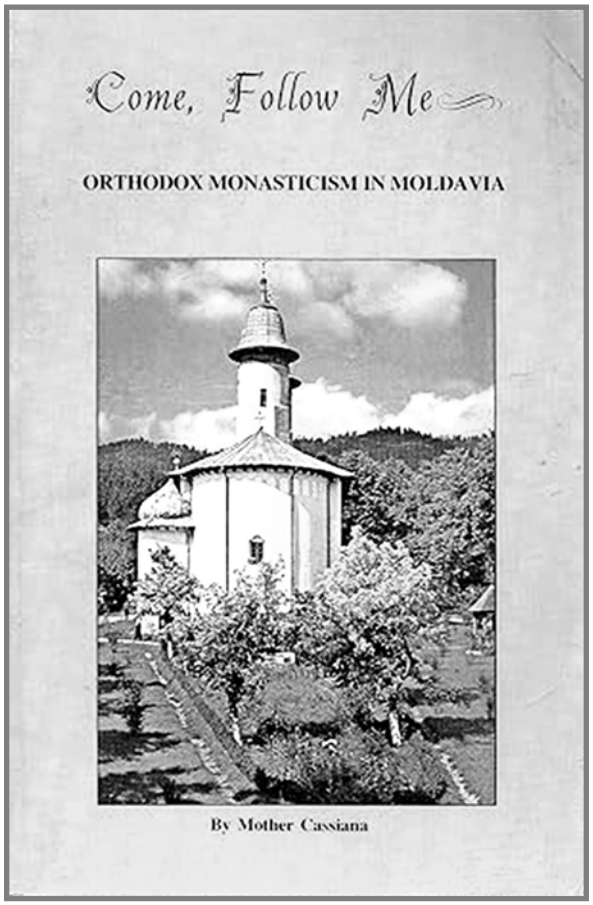
Something I have found in monasteries, I would say, is that all aspects of life have a certain liturgical quality. So what I have called the "integrated life" is a sort of circular economy with spiritual as well as physical dimensions. You see this very tangibly at Holy Myrrhbearers; you might buy a prayer rope, then be introduced to the sheep whose wool it is made of. You see it in the structure of the day, with the constant back-and-forth between praying the services and getting on with all the daily tasks that a monastery, like any other household, or farm, has to deal with. And every so often there is an image, an icon of this integration. Some years ago, there was a wonderful photo of one of the Sisters carrying a bale of hay to the sheep through the snow. She is carrying the bale on her shoulder, so the figure mirrors exactly the icon of the Good Shepherd carrying the lost sheep – a profound illustration of what it means to image the Lord in creation. It is the sort of thing one can imagine St Ephrem the Syrian writing a twenty-stanza hymn about. My impressions seem to be rather a lot about sheep – but then so are the Gospels. +

Dr. Elizabeth Theokritoff (eat38@cam.ac.uk) is an associate lecturer and supervisor at the Institute of Orthodox Christian Studies, Cambridge (www.iocs.cam.ac.uk). Her article is found at brill.com/view/journals/mist/41/3/article-p388_11.xml. To request an e-version of the interview with links to places mentioned, please send an email to myrrhbearers@holymyrrhbearers.com.

Now Available at Our Online Store!

In 1984, during the Cold War, an American nun moved to the region of Romania known as Moldavia to live at Varatec Monastery. Her memoir, *Come, Follow Me,* is a fascinating inside account of her year in a community of 350 nuns in an ancient Orthodox country. Author Mother Cassiana is currently the acting superior of Protection of the Holy Virgin Monastery in Lake George, Colorado.

This book is a favorite of our community. It is difficult to find for purchase, so we arranged with Mother Cassiana to offer it through Holy Myrrhbearers Monastery store. It would make a nice Christmas gift!



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For our news

Our patronal feast in May was a joy. On Holy Myrrhbearers Sunday a Divine Liturgy was served by Fr. Myron Ohryon (Ukranian, Binghamton). The Leavetaking Divine Liturgy was concelebrated by Fr. James Dutko (Carpatho-Russian, Binghamton) and Fr. Micah Breland (OCA, Oneonta), with fellowship over lunch. We were also blessed to host Divine Liturgies for Transfiguration, Dormition, and the Protection of the Holy Theotokos. Our music is directed by Mother Katherine, but once in her absence, the festal choir was led by Mother Raphaela!

Throughout this year, we've been blessed by many guests seeking a place of peace and prayer. Women contact us from states both near (NY, VT, PA, MA, CT) and far (VA, MD, NC, AK). They find us through recommendations of priests and friends; or through internet searches; or by seeing our name on the back of our prayer books!

The June Annual Trustees Meeting was our first ever hybrid meeting with video option.

Mother Michaela (at right with baby goat), turning 90 in December, is recovering well after a minor stroke in September. She was glad to return home to the monastery, and to be back with her cats. We thank God for the young people in the Orthodox Christian Fellowship (OCF) of St. Innocent Orthodox Mission in Oneonta, who prepared accommodations such as adding a handrail and moving her bed downstairs.

Six baby chicks purchased for our farm in April were already laying eggs by September. Two new chicks were born to mother hen Minnie in late summer. Proud father Splash keeps a close watch over them. Mother goat Maisie had triplets this spring and has been generously providing us milk for cheese and yogurt all summer and fall. Three baby lambs were born this spring and two purchased, bringing the sheep flock to over 50. Our guests enjoy going to the barn to meet the animals.

From our land we've enjoyed roses, lilies, mint and chives; however, our flower beds need a lot of work and goldenrod has taken over the old fruit and vegetable plots. So there are plenty of opportunities for parish or family groups who might like to plan a work day here!

Holy Myrrhbearers made many entries to the Otsego County Fair in August for wool, needlework, baking and photography. Mother Katherine won 6 first-place blue ribbons for fleeces, weaving, yarn.

On our wishlist: a push-start generator as backup for water pump and lights in house and barn, replacing one 25 years old in poor condition.

We have a postulant from TX who joined last winter, and another woman from PA tested her vocation with us for five months. The monastery has space, so if you know a woman seeking an Orthodox monastic life of prayer and work in community, we would be pleased to meet her!

Our online store is active and shipping all over the US. The pocket-sized *Manual of the Hours of the Orthodox Church* is still our best-seller, offered in many parish bookstores. It is heart-warming to talk with friends who purchase our Christmas cards each year to help support the monastery and share it with their loved ones.

Throughout this year we have appreciated both your prayer requests and your prayers for us. Thank you for all your support for our community over almost 50 years. May we soon greet each other:

"Christ is born! Glorify Him!"

CHRISTMAS CARDS

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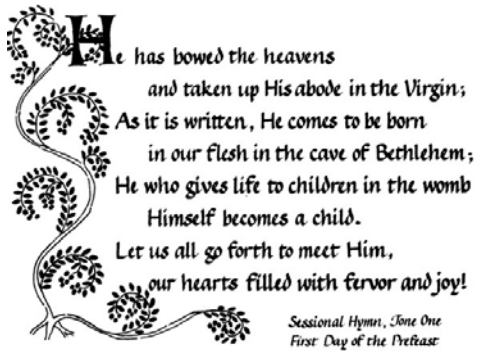

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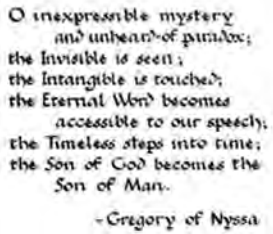

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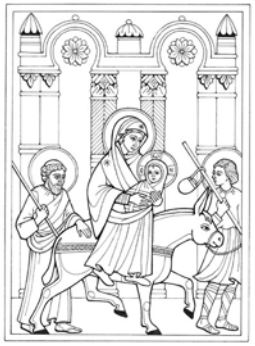

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Our online store also displays our **prayer books**, including:

Royal Hours: Christmas, Theophany and Pascha **No. 921**
The Kathisma Psalter with the Nine Canticles **No. 922**
A Manual of the Hours of the Orthodox Church **No. 901**
A Manual of Communion Prayers, Vol 1 & Vol 2 **No. 902, 904**
A Manual of Prayer and Praise to the Theotokos **No. 903**

And you can order **books by Mother Raphaela**:

Living in Christ: Essays on the Christian Life by an Orthodox Nun
Growing in Christ: Shaped in His Image
Becoming Icons of Christ

Order now at www.holymyrrhbearers.com!

We also receive orders by phone at (607) 432 - 3179, by mail, and by email to orders@holymyrrhbearers.com. Thank you!