

A Message from the Patriarch of the Apostolic Orthodox Church

Spiritual Masters

Last week I received an e-mail from a visitor to our web site. She had spent some time in our *Reading Room*, and asked if her perceptions were correct.

“It seems to me that you place a great deal of emphasis on questions and answers. Having grown up in the ‘60s, it brings to mind the Spiritual Masters that seemed to be everywhere one turned. Are you saying that Christianity should have them? If so, then when does one need to seek a Master—and why?”

I suppose that does seem a strange concept to Westerners. But it must be remembered that Christianity is an *Eastern* religion. Jesus set the standard by drawing unto Himself the Apostles. He did exactly as was, and is, the norm in the Orient: a Master takes a relatively few number of disciples whom he personally trains; they in turn train others, etc. The Apostles perpetuated the concept with their disciples, and so it continued for the first few hundred years of the Church. Eventually, the concept ceased to be the rule and became the exception, existing primarily within the walls of monasteries, unavailable to the public at large. The dialogue (questions and answers) was replaced by the monologue (the sermon), and with it Christians became less spiritual and their clergy became more powerful. What a shame!

What is the purpose of a Master? When do we need one? Those questions can be answered by a single example, and although I write as a Christian, my words are applicable to any religion. For although their methods may seem different, the concept that they teach is the same: Truth.

Let’s suppose that you have a great interest in mountain climbing. You “live and breathe it,” as they say. You most likely would begin by reading books or viewing videos on the subject, perhaps take a rudimentary class or two. Once you’ve mastered the basics, chances are you’d strike out on your own. You’d travel as much as possible to new sites, new challenges; you’d climb, to quote the old saying, “because it’s there.” But as the novelty began to wear thin, you’d become more discontented. Your “bag of tricks” would be nearly empty, and the excitement you once felt would begin to wane. At this point you’d have basically two options: either learn to be satisfied with things as they are, or seek help. The natural sense self-evolution will prompt you towards the latter, but it would still be your choice.

Let’s say you choose to move on, to seek help. You’ve set your sights on a particular mountain to climb; one, it seems, that few have conquered. You could read more books, do more traveling, attend more classes. But if you’re *serious*, you’d opt for a guide, a personal instructor. We’ll take that route, as it answers the questions posed above. You would want to select a guide who has actually *been* where you wish to go. If he had only read of it in books or talked to others, it would be the blind leading the blind. You would also want to speak with some of his clients, and if he won’t allow this, then move on. But there is an important ingredient missing that we

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haven't mentioned: trust. You must be able to trust him, literally, with your life, for one misstep, one miscommunication, and you could hurl to your death.

So, you've done your homework, met with the guide, met his clients (and they're all still alive—that's reassuring!) and you have accepted each other. He will begin by assessing your abilities. He'll watch you climb, and may seem to be almost uninterested even in your best efforts. He's being objective, trying to size you up. Why? To see what ascent to take, of course. All great peaks have several avenues of approach, not all suited for everyone. You must trust his judgment, even if you disagree—he's been there, you haven't. He will offer you a set of "techniques," and much to your chagrin, may change them in midstream. He may scream at you, catch you off guard, to see how you react. All this has two purposes: 1) to get you where you wish to go and, 2) to insure you don't kill yourself in the process.

On the "big day," you may be surprised to find that he's not giving you a "pep talk," rather merely moves out in silence. On your ascent he'll neither lead, nor will he follow. He'll stay at the side to more properly watch your progress. It must be *your* climb, not his. If he sees a stone in your path, he won't mention it—that's your responsibility. If you're oblivious to it, trip, and begin to fall, you'll feel his hand grasp you and pull you back. You may even see a smile cross his face. He's not laughing *at* you; he's remembering the time it happened to *him*. There may be times during the climb that he seems to fade into the background, and you feel alone. If so, good, as that's how it must be. And on reaching the summit? Well, we won't go that far—not this trip. Be patient. There'll be another time.

I won't draw the obvious conclusions between our guide and the Spiritual Master—I trust those who read these *Messages* have the intelligence to do so for themselves. A few words, however. Everyone reaches the stage in their Spiritual growth when they need help. There's absolutely no avoiding it, and one of the most difficult things for us to do is ask for it, right? We hate to admit that we're deficient, that despite our best efforts, we're stagnating. There's an old saying, popular in the "New Age" movement, but predating it by millennia: "When the Disciple is ready, the Master will appear." That is more than just a glib statement, but a fact of cosmic reality.

So, should Christianity return to the Master-Disciple relationship of its early days? Absolutely, if it is to survive. Today, more than ever, people are seeking something which they can't quite articulate. It's that allusive feeling that "this isn't all there is." And in the past, the Masters have always been there, waiting to be seen by those with "eyes that see," and heard by those with "ears that hear." And the Masters will always *be* there. The Masters *are* there—look for them!

May the Light of Lights enfold you!

Mathias Mar Yusef, Patriarch

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