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The Deep Meaning of Fasting



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The Spiritual Father of the Monastery of St Macarius

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The Spiritual Father of the Monastery of St Macarius

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FASTING

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THE IMITATION OF CHRIST

THE Church imitates Christ. All that Christ has done the Church also does, so that He may become its life. Christ's call to Matthew, "Follow me" was intended by Him to mean "Take my life for you". The Church has thus adopted this call as a scheme of its own.

Fasting in the life and works of Christ ranks as the first response to the act of unction and of being filled with the Holy Spirit. It represents the first battle in which Christ did away with His adversary, the prince of this world. By His forty days' experience of absolute fasting where He shut up the devil's voice, Christ laid down for us the basis of our dealings with our enemy, with all his allurements and vain illusions. "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer and fasting" (Mr. 9:29). For when man enters into prayerful fasting, Satan departs from the flesh.

As the Son of God, Christ did not need fasting, nor did He need an open confrontation with Satan, just as He did not need Baptism or filling with the Holy Spirit. Yet He fulfilled everything for our sake, so that His life and deeds might become ours. For if we know that Christ was baptized to "be revealed to Israel" (Jn. 1:13), it follows that being filled with the Holy Spirit meant "being tempted by the

devil". This was in order that He may be revealed before the spirits of darkness, and openly enter into combat with the devil on behalf of our race. As for fasting, it was to elevate the flesh to the level of war with the spirits of evil—those powers which hold sway over our weaker part, the flesh.

The reader may notice that baptism, being filled with the Holy Spirit, and fasting are a fundamental and inseparable series of acts in Christ's life which culminated in perfect victory over Satan, in preparation for his total annihilation by the cross.

It is then extremely important to accept and then to feel the power of each of these three acts in our depths, drawing forth from Christ their action in us as they worked in Him, so that His same life may identify with ours. For the ultimate aim of baptism, of being filled with the Holy Spirit and of fasting, is that Christ Himself may dwell in us: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me" (Gal. 2:20).

In baptism the connection with our old Adam is cut off, so that we may receive our sonship to God in Christ. In being filled with the Holy Spirit, our connection with the devil and with the life of sin is cut off, that we may receive the Spirit of life in Christ. And in fasting, the connection between instinct and Satan is cut off, that the flesh may have victory in its life according to the Spirit, in Christ.

We can then never sever these three acts from each other; for baptism grants spiritual fulness; and spiritual fulness grants (by fasting) victory for the flesh to walk in the Spirit. By the three together man lives in Christ, and Christ lives in man.

The dimension of time in these three acts does not weaken their merging together, nor does it separate one from the other. For baptism in childhood, the spirit's fulness in mental and psychic maturity, and fasting which concludes these three acts, could not be seen separately in spiritual vision. For although they occur separately in time because of human necessity, they are one act spiritually. They spring forth to us from Christ who is "One Act" or "One Word". In all three acts, Christ dwells in us personally to give us His fulness,

image and life, so that we might *live Him* as a One Act and One Word, and no longer live our own selves in their torn and disrupted image.

The point to understand is that fasting is a divine act of life which we receive from Christ complementary to baptism and fulness. The Church has been occupied from the beginning with infusing into its own body the acts of Christ's life, so that they may become life-giving acts to all its members. For if it imitates Christ in its life discipline, this is so because it has been given grace and authority by God to possess Christ Himself as a life of its own. The Church, which is one with Christ, is an alive and efficacious image of the life of Christ. The Gospel describes it as the "bride of Christ" united to her Bridegroom. For whereas the Gospel declares that the Church has become one with Christ, it still reiterates that Christ will ever remain a Bridegroom on His own—no matter how much He offers Himself. For neither does Christ become a Church, nor does the Church become a Christ. This confirms to us that we, as members in the body of Christ, always need to strive to acquire Christ, that we may become more like Him, and that we may be a bride "without spot", a betrothed "pure bride" in a perpetual state of betrothal like the Virgin who conceived and bore the Logos. Virginity here is "to keep oneself unstained from the world". Being stained is the ungodly union between Satan and "the lust of the flesh", "the lust of the eyes", and the "pride of life". These three bonds were untied and shattered by Christ during this fast on the Mount of Temptation. He gave us the shattered bonds as a cheque of inheritance to live and carry into effect by fasting in the fulness of the Holy Spirit and in the sacrament of baptism.

Fasting in this sense is one of the fundamental phases that Christ underwent. Man could never claim that he lives in the full maturity of Christ, or that Christ abides in him in His full measure, if he overlooks fasting. For if baptism is one phase and crucifixion another, fasting is an extremely important stage between baptism and crucifixion. For fulness with the Holy Spirit, which Christ consummated by baptism, elevated the flesh to the level of extraordinary fasting, i.e. total

deprivation from food and drink, utter seclusion and prayer. He thus raised the flesh to the stage of the cross.

It is impossible for man to carry his cross well and get through the temptation of the devil, the ordeal of the world, and the oppression of evil men without fulfilling the phase of fasting on the Mount of Temptation. If being filled with the Holy Spirit does not qualify man for fasting, man will inevitably be unable to bear the tribulation of the cross.

Here the Church's imitation of Christ's works is a necessary course of life for us, in which we may discover our salvation, strength, security and victory. It was not for Himself that Christ was baptized, nor was it for Himself that He was crucified, and, consequently, not for Himself that He fasted forty days. The works of Christ—themselves a mighty and omnipotent power—have become sources of our salvation and life. However, their power is not imparted to us unless we experience and practise them. For he who is baptized puts on Christ, and he who is filled with the Holy Spirit lives by means of Christ's life, and he who fasts wins Christ's victory over the prince of this world.

Thus Christ declares most clearly the extent to which His deeds and life influence us: "So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed" (Jn. 8:30). But how can the Son set us free from the world, the devil and our ego except by dwelling in us and offering us His life, His works and His victory? He reiterates often, "Abide in me, and I in you." This in fact is the mutual action. We perform His deeds and live according to His example, and thereupon He imparts to us the power of His deeds, His life and His example. He time and again calls our attention; "Learn from me". Here He reveals that He has placed Himself as a model of life and works, as our "Forerunner", as the "first fruits" that we may emulate Him sincerely in everything to be "like Him". He became like us that we may become like Him.

After fulfilling the course of our salvation by means of all these works, Christ stands there with His pale face and the wounds in His

hands, feet and side, asking, "Do you believe in me? Do you believe in the works I have done? Do you really accept me as a Bridegroom?" He does not wait to hear us say "Yes" (only as a slothful bride); He invites us to a total communion with Him in suffering and glory alike. We thus have to prove our communion with Him in faith by having communion with Him in His works. For it is only works which testify to the genuineness of our faith. Yet He, as a true Bridegroom, did not leave us to invent works for ourselves, but Himself laid down the course of our works and life: "I am the way"; "He who *follows* me will not walk in darkness". Following Him here is not so much an intellectual theory as it is tracking Him, imitating His works, and sharing communion in love and suffering.

The reader should notice that all the commandments of Christ regarding works, whether they be voluntary poverty, asceticism, renunciation of kindred, divestment, or bearing the cross—all revolve around the person of Christ and end up in Him: "for my sake"; "Come, follow me"; "for my name's sake"; "be my disciple"; "come after me"; "watch with me".

Every work of Christ's which He loved to do, He shares with us, or rather we share with Him on account of our love, our sacrifice and our asceticism. It is from Him that all our works are derived: our asceticism from His asceticism, our fasting from His fasting, our love from His love. Ultimately, communion here is a realistic one which we develop daily by further imitating Him in mind and action, and by deepening our awareness of Him in our life—making Him active within us, while keeping us free, spontaneous and quick in response, as a bride is to a bridegroom.

All the works we perform in the name of Christ, for His sake and in imitation of Him, (whether they be fasting, vigil, patience, endurance of suffering or persecution, service, sacrificial love, or crucifixion) all are but a voluntary translation of the desire to imitate and unite with Christ ("Follow me"). They express communion in spirit, heart and intention.

Here, such works may be a way to express the overt offering of the entire soul to Christ in self-surrendering love and absolute discipleship, as did John, James his brother and the rest of the disciples. They offered their lives and surrendered their souls to Christ the moment they saw and heard Him. They forsook their homes and jobs and became followers: "Lo, we have left everything and followed you", thus becoming truly partners of all Christ's works, career and sufferings: "You are those who continued with me in my trials."

It is possible that such works as fasting, vigil, prayer, service or sacrifice may express a hidden love, added to life's daily tasks, such as earning one's living and bringing up children. This is seen in many who followed Christ without official publicity, like Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea, Martha, Mary, Lazarus and others whose high level of love toward Christ was by no means inferior to that of the Apostles themselves. Yet, those who actually forsook everything (their homes and their jobs) and followed Christ are those who, by spiritual works, most sublimely expressed a deep evaluation of Christ's person: "We have left everything and followed you". The word "followed" here denotes a shift from worldly work to spiritual work; for Christ is great enough to fill our entire life and meet all our needs, thus becoming our sole work, our sole hope and our sole interest.

This is itself the same orthodox doctrine which the Church received from the Apostles regarding zeal, fervor and agony in works, the main measure for every person to express his evaluation of Christ. For the degree of concern and sincerity in spiritual action in every person's life is that which reveals the light emanating from Christ. This consequently bears witness to the Father: "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16).

The Apostles inherited the entire life of Christ, and were eyewitnesses and partakers of His works and acts. They inherited lengthy fasts

which they saw and heard: "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer and fasting" (Mark 9:29). They inherited night-long prayers, "Watch and pray". They inherited agony in prayer with frequent prostrations and sweat as of drops of blood: "And being in an agony He prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down upon the ground... And he said to his disciples, 'Why do you sleep? Rise and pray'" (Luke 22:44-46). They inherited endurance and patience amid the insults of the hierarchy and the betrayal of comrades, "If they persecuted me they will persecute you." They inherited ministry in markets among the sick, the sinners and the poor. They inherited agony, suffering and crucifixion, the most precious and exquisite gift they inherited from Christ: "The cup that I drink you will drink"; "Then Paul answered, 'What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned, but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.'" (Acts 21:13). All these works they inherited not as acts apart from Christ, but as part and parcel of Him. Christ dwelt in their hearts through faith when they received the Holy Spirit, and they thus performed all the works of Christ according to His promises, even miracles and death!

The Church has inherited this living apostolic experience; i.e. it has inherited *the Christ working in the Apostles*. So the importance, or rather the inevitability of works in the Orthodox Church, means that the Church focuses upon Christ Himself working in us just as He did in the Apostles—doing the same deeds He did for our salvation. For the Church believes in exactly what St. Paul means when he says: "For God is at work in you, both to will and to work." It is equally confident that this also leads to St. Paul's words, "Do all to the glory of God" (1Cor. 10:31). It is through Christ and in His presence that works should be done; for it is only the work of Christ which leads to the glory of God, for "Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father" (Ph. 2:11).

It is now clear that the Orthodox Church's belief in works is nothing

but faith in the perfect life in Christ. To this perfection belongs Christ's whole action and, or better, even His entire mission and compassion for all humanity. Works then are not limited acts done by the human will to relieve the ego. The importance of works in Church thought is based upon the fact that all works must spring forth from the will of Christ and be perfected by His power: "I can do all things in him who strengthens me" (Ph. 4:13). Works then must end up in the glory of God the Father. In other words they must reveal Him and testify to Him: "That they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."

Henceforth, the concept of "faith and works" in the Orthodox Church is inseparable from the living person of Christ, who is the source of faith and works alike in human life. The ultimate end of both faith and works is the glorification of God the Father—an essential work which belongs exclusively to Christ: "Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

The law which correctly insures that works are done through Christ and for the glory of the Father, is the perfect imitation of Christ in every word, deed and behavior. Man should invoke the Spirit of Christ in everything by prayer, so that works may be cleared of all impurities of self-will and human thought, and that they might be pure of flattery, hypocrisy, falsification, prejudice and self-love. All of these cause works to be ineffectual, fruitless and dead.

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SANCTIFY A FAST

WHEN we strive to walk along the narrow way, we should be always conscious of being overshadowed by the cross, so that we might persevere, however great our hardship. To attain perseverance, it is essential that the sacrifices we offer never cease to be offered in love.

You should know, my dear brother, that striving in the narrow way entails the risk of falling into either the negative sin of despair, or, at the opposite extreme, a sense of heroism and perfection in virtue. We can only attain to genuine love by avoiding these two dangers which threaten our progress in the narrow way, and this can be achieved if we discover how to overcome our own selves. So let us not feel sorry for our own selves lest we fall into despair, nor praise ourselves lest we fall into the sense of heroism, which the saints call “vainglory”.

If we delve deep into the essence of the divine love, which is the model of love we intend to follow, we find that it can only be attained by self-denial, to the point of self-renunciation, or even destruction¹. This we learn in Christ on the cross and in His earlier life. Therefore, to go on in love we must practise self-hatred² till we

(1) The destruction of self is achieved by the elimination of its will. The degree to which we accept death is a measure of the extent to which self-will has been eliminated.

(2) Self-hatred is an inward attempt to deliver the personality from the captivity of the self, so that man may be united with the other (whether God or man) through love.

are no longer concerned with ourselves or any of the things of this world we used to count as gain.

Fasting is a test in which the personality defies the self. It is an exercise in which the self has to be forsaken and resisted by the whole man. Fasting may therefore be considered an act of love of the highest order, a physical way of entering into the experience of the cross, and an inseparable part of that experience.

The life of the Holy Spirit is revived within us if we follow Him into the wilderness of fasting, to face the destruction of the self, at least in part, just as a sheep is led to the slaughter. The secret of this revival of the life of the Spirit within us lies in the extent to which we succeed in attaining this love offered to be slaughtered. This is a first test, if we are to follow the way of the cross to the end.

You know that the effort of fasting is felt primarily by the body, which is the physical area in which the self is confined, and in which it reveals its nature and desires. Thus, when we fast we exhaust the body, and so, indirectly, subdue the self also³. And if we subdue the self through the subjugation of the body, we have in fact come close to the destruction of the self, at least partially.

So it is that by fasting, we in some way fulfil the word of the Lord, "Whoever loses his life for my sake will save it" (Lk. 9:25). Yet I would go back to the word "partially"; for we must aim to attain to a state of accepting not the partial but the complete annihilation of the self, and this can only take place by an act of deliberate volition. In other words, if we begin with any exercise (such as fasting), which brings us to the partial overcoming of the self, we need to supplement the feeling of satisfaction that comes from accepting this state, with an acceptance of the total destruction of the self. This is attained by the mental acceptance of death itself, willingly with no dismay or restraint: "But we received the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust

(3) Subjugation of the self comes when you undertake some activity which is neither agreeable or desirable. Its attainment is a side-effect of fasting (not the prime motive, which is love).

in ourselves" (II Cor. 1:9).

When our father Abraham offered Isaac his son, he did so partially with his hands, but totally in intention. For when Abraham proved his willingness to offer Isaac his only son totally, God did not leave him to carry out the slaughter; when the offering had been only partially made on the physical level, God considered the sacrifice to have actually been carried out. This, and only this, is why God redeemed Isaac, and that with a ram, a symbol of Christ who was to redeem those souls whose self is destroyed partially by their actions, but totally in intention.

When Abraham offered Isaac his son, he exchanged him, according to the divine plan, for a ram; this expresses the destruction of the body as a ransom for the soul. Likewise, in the test of fasting, or any act of self-denial based on sacrifice and ransom, we are called upon to have no pity on ourselves, and to make the offering of our selves and our bodies a total offering in intention. That is to say, we should be content to accept a sentence of death at any moment, cherishing it deeply within ourselves as a foundation for life.

Yet, God keeps watch to prevent destruction from penetrating to the soul. God redeems the soul; "Blessed is God who redeemed my soul" (II Sam. 4:9). Christ, blessed be His name, has redeemed our souls, and so there is no fear nor alarm whatever in facing the experience of self-destruction, such as would make us search for a ram to offer instead of ourselves. This would mean that our offering was incomplete, and our intention weak and hesitant. At the moment when intention reaches the stage of complete self-renunciation, and the total consent to self-destruction, we see the meek ram fastened with nails to the tree, offered by our compassionate Father at the right time, so that none of those who love Him and believe in Him might perish.

The meaning of all this is that if we offer anything instead of ourselves, it is rejected. If we look around in search of a ram to offer instead of our self, we forfeit the Promise made in Isaac forever, and

even forfeit Christ Himself. For whoever fails to offer his life totally, or is dismayed at the prospect of self-sacrifice, and so of death, finds that his intention retreats and he rejects death. He becomes evasive and offers some outward sacrifice, such as an act of service, or an offering of money, or uses any other strategem to avoid sacrificing his own self. And so he loses his portion in Christ the Redeemer, for Christ redeems from death those who have accepted death.

Therefore, the experience of the destruction of our self must have nothing about it of self-pity or weakness of faith. It should not be incomplete, nor should we seek to replace it by the giving of money or anything else in this world, nor even by giving up the whole world, for the soul is more precious than all things. There is nothing that can be offered in exchange for the soul except Christ, may His name be blessed. He alone can be offered, for He in condescension and humility through creative Love, put a value on His divine soul equal to that of the human soul.

We once more repeat that Christ, blessed be His name, cannot become a ransom for the human soul unless man offers his soul on the altar of love, in death to the world, making a total offering with all his will, relinquishing himself for ever, raising the knife with his own hand in determination and earnest resolve, thus proving that he has accepted death.

Every test, every battle against the self and every fast, in which man fails to reach this level of self-renunciation (as we see it in the knife raised by Abraham's hand to slaughter Isaac his only son, or in God's abandoning His Beloved only Son nailed to the cross) leaves him unworthy of the ransom (Christ) which was prepared by God in exchange for the soul thus offered. And so a battle is no longer seen as a battle, or fasting as fasting to destroy the self according to the commandment. It is seen instead as a caressing of the soul and a strengthening of its power.

The Lord fasted on a high level, for He was fulfilling in the flesh, and by the flesh, what He had already perfected before the incarnation;

He “emptied himself” (Ph. 2:7). He fulfilled this emptying of Himself in many ways, but fasting was the most wonderful, for in fasting He actually sacrificed His body mystically; the fast which He undertook and in which He finally experienced extreme hunger and thirst for forty days, proved His clear and earnest intention to make the ultimate sacrifice.

Thus the Lord in fact sacrificed His body before the cross. And when He offered His body to His disciples at the Last Supper, He offered it crucified by an act of His will before it was crucified by the hands of sinners, and sacrificed in intention before being sacrificed by the rulers. In other words, He only said “Take, eat, this is my body that is offered... Take, drink, this is my blood which is shed...”, on the basis of an inner state in which Christ had already dealt with His soul; the sacrifice and the shedding of His blood had been carried out in His own will and intention, as His fasting bears witness and proves. For it was not easy that the Lord, while sitting among His disciples and eating and drinking with them, should say “This is my body that is offered... and this is my blood shed...”, unless He had actually undergone that sacrifice, even though it were mystically as in fasting.

The Lord had crucified Himself for the world before the world crucified Him. He carried out the offering of His body, or His self, as a sacrifice on behalf of the world immediately after being baptized, when He was led by the Spirit. He gladly obeyed and went to face the test of fasting which is the volitional aspect of the cross.

Thus it was that the Lord was careful to institute and celebrate the rite of the Eucharist prior the Cross, and not after the Resurrection, to show that the sacrifice and offering were a free act.

The mystical body which was offered in the Last Supper in the form of bread and wine is the deepest example man has known of the invisible being seen in the visible, and the future being actualized in the present. Prophecy in the Old Testament was confined to providing people with a mental image of events in the obscure future, but prophecy, as presented by Christ in the New Testament, is the

good news of the fulfilment of the future in the present, and a physical receiving of the invisible and the intangible. That is the meaning of: "Take, eat... Take, drink... this is my body... this is my blood." Please notice, my brother, this was said a whole day before the crucifixion, but He saw that the coming events were completely in accordance with His will. He saw the cross standing and on it the body being slain and the blood being shed; He saw Himself content with it all. And so He took bread and filled it with the mystery of the broken body, and wine and filled it with the mystery of the shed blood, and He fed His disciples; and thus they ate from His hands the mystery of His will, and drank the mystery of His love, the mystery of His sufferings, the mystery of Salvation.

Therefore, when we share in the mystery of the body and the blood in the eucharist, we share not only in the cross, but also in a mystical life poured out, and a body that has struggled with severe fasting, deprivation, want and pain.

Hence, if we find ourselves face to face with some suffering such as we meet with daily when we bear witness to the truth, we consider ourselves partakers, or in communion, "with those who were so treated" (cf. Heb. 10:33). So we do not grow faint within ourselves; for the communion in the flesh and blood is an expression that means communion in the whole life of Christ which is fraught with tribulations, fasts and suffering.

The Lord Jesus' offering of His body on Thursday, sacrificed by an act of will He had already made before being crucified on Friday, was performed by a power He drew from the reality of His own life. Even the cross itself was but an expression of an existing reality, for Christ crucified Himself for the world before the world crucified Him. It would appear that the crucifixion was the final act of the Lord, but it was in fact the theme of His entire life, begun with the test of fasting, when He sacrificed His body through hunger, and His blood through thirst for forty whole days.

Moses fasted for a similar period of forty days, but this was to

prepare him to receive the Commandments and the Law, i.e. the written word of God. Elijah also fasted for forty days, yet this was to make him worthy to see and meet with God. The fasting of Moses and Elijah was a profit to them and to mankind. As for the Lord Jesus, He fasted not that He might receive anything, but to make a free offering of Himself in an act of will and to manifest the coming sacrifice of the cross.

As for us, we fast not to receive anything nor to offer anything, for we have received Christ, and in Him we have already received everything before we fast, and even before we are born. Nor do we fast to offer anything; for no offering of ours, even if we go to our death, is of any avail in removing a single sin. Nor can our fasting be called redemptive, as if by sacrificing our bodies and blood by hunger and thirst, we could redeem the smallest soul in all humanity, or even ourselves. Why? Because the sin within us invalidates the redemptive act and makes our sacrifice powerless.

What, then, is our fasting?

We fast and offer our bodies as a sacrifice; the outward form of this is bearing fatigue, but its essence is the intentional acceptance of death, that we may be counted fit to be mystically united in the flesh and blood of Christ. It is then that we become, in Christ's sacrifice, a pure sacrifice, capable of interceding and redeeming.

Fasting, being an incomplete sacrifice due to sin, has to be consummated in communion, or the partaking in the pure Body and Blood, so as to become a perfect sacrifice, efficacious in prayer and intercession. Hence, every Holy Communion Has to be preceded by fasting, and every fast has to end with Holy Communion. When we receive Communion in this way it is right for us to intercede, for our offering and sacrifice are made perfect. "Pray to receive Communion worthily. Pray for us and for all Christians" (Coptic Liturgy).

In Lent we prepare ourselves for the Last Supper. We prepare for the coming together of two like things; for how could he who does not

sacrifice himself be worthy of Him who sacrificed His life? If we eat of a sacrificed body while not sacrificing our own selves, how can we claim that union takes place? And the Mystical Supper on Thursday, which is the intentional acceptance of a life of sacrifice, is but a preparation for accepting sufferings openly, even unto death.

Thus, whenever we eat of the Body and drink of the Blood, we are mystically prepared for preaching the death of the Lord and confessing His resurrection. Every testimony to the death and resurrection of the Lord carries with it a readiness for martyrdom. And every martyrdom carries with it a resurrection.

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List of Books

by Father Matta El-Meskeen

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**Deisis,
Fresco dating from the 10th/11th century,
(The Monastery of Saint Macarius)**