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THE BURNING BUSH

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Archimandrite Roman Braga
10 Year Anniversary of His Repose

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Regretfully, the monastery can no longer offer public internet.

NOTE:
Please note that our phone system has been out of order for a few weeks but it is now functioning again. You can call, text or leave a message at the monastery number: 517-569-2873.

GREETINGS FROM MOTHER GABRIELLA

Dear Friends and Supporters,

As many of you know and have participated to the symposium dedicated to the tenth anniversary of Fr Roman's repose, we had the blessing to have as guests and speakers His Beatitude Metropolitan TIKHON, His Eminence Archbishop NATHANIEL, His Eminence Archbishop DANIEL, His Grace Bishop ANDREI, Very Reverend Mother CHRISTOPHORA, Very Reverend Archimandrite JOSEPH, and Reverend Father JOHN.

Their presence and their words remembering and honoring Father Roman were touching and enlightening. We have been asked by a few people to make them available. We are thus dedicating this issue of the monastic journal to the memory of Fr Roman.

The weekend started on Friday evening with the celebration of Vespers and the reading of the *Akathist Hymn to the Mother of God—the Burning Bush—* followed by a light supper before the beginning of the evening presentations. Rev. Archimandrite Joseph and Rev. Mother Christophora spoke about their personal interactions with Fr Roman.

On Saturday the Divine Liturgy was presided by His Beatitude Metropolitan TIKHON, together with Archbishop NATHANIEL, His Eminence Archbishop DANIEL, Bishop ANDREI, Archimandrite JOSEPH and Fr JOHN. The memorial service took place in the cemetery at the site of Fr Roman's grave. A memorial meal was served and presentation were offered by His Beatitude Metropolitan TIKHON, Archbishop NATHANIEL, Archbishop DANIEL and Rev. Fr John Konkle.

The memorial was attended by a great number of faithful, clergy and monastics who gathered to honor his memory.

We are deeply grateful for the participation of such distinguished guests and for their inspiring words of reflection and witness,

A heartfelt thank you goes to the many volunteers who worked hard, as well to all those who through their monetary contributions and personal participation made this event a success.

We are also grateful to our neighbors at Rives Church for their friendship and generosity of, once again, offering their facilities to accommodate this event.

May you allways be blessed.

Mother Gabriella

"FATHER ROMAN BRAGA"
PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

Nathaniel, Archbishop
Romanian Orthodox Episcopate of America

I will leave to others to address the early life of Fr Roman Braga and offer personal reflections about him. There must be, nevertheless, some limited background information. I divide my reflection into three "periods."

Roman Braga took monastic vows in 1954 at the Monastery of Cetățuia in Iași. Following his ordination as deacon in 1954 and priest the following year, 1965, he was titled Archimandrite in 1968. His true formation took place under Romania's Communist system. After intensely tortuous terms in prison, he accepted to be sent to Brazil in 1969, where he was assigned to a Romanian Orthodox parish of the Romanian Patriarchate. There he learned to speak the Portuguese language, which he entitled, "bad Romanian."

While in Brazil, he began correspondence with Valerian Trifa, Archbishop of the Romanian Episcopate, a diocese of the Orthodox Church in America. In 1972, at the invitation of Archbishop Valerian, Archimandrite Roman elected to come to The United States.

It was the Summer of 1972. I was in the lower chapel of the Vatra church during the annual Episcopate Congress. In the upstairs church, Archbishop Valerian was introducing Fr Roman to the members of the Congress as a potential clergyman for the Episcopate and that is when I first heard the name. Father Roman was accepted and became a member of the "Vatra Staff." At the time he must have thought: "The Archbishop is a monk, Fr Secretary is celibate…it will be like a monastery!" But poor Fr Roman; Shortly after his arrival in Grass Lake, Michigan he was invited to take off his monastic beard!

At that time, I was living in the Holy Resurrection monastic community located at Lee and Grey Tower Roads on Vatra property. Father Mark Forsberg (later Bishop of the OCA Albanian Archdiocese) and I often took coffee at the Episcopal Residence—Vatra "Coffee Hour" and "Mail Call." That is where we met Fr Roman. He was learn-

ing English/American (he spoke American not English). He listened to our conversations, watched television with Archbishop Valerian and secretary Fr John Tocăniță, followed conversations with Vatra guests and listened at meals to the flow of words.

This presence at Vatra was a boon and a balm both to Archbishop Valerian and Fr Roman. They were both very intelligent and learned men who shared their mutual knowledge of Romanian history, politics, and the Romanian language.

After some time, the Archbishop assigned our community the task of refreshing the pre-existing liturgical texts published by the Episcopate. The three of us, Mark, Roman and myself, determined to introduce "contemporary English" and to write modified Byzantine music, including a "Unison Music Liturgy for Congregational Participation." We completed full Matins, Vespers and the Divine Liturgy.

Father Roman was also drafted to be on the *Solia Newspaper* staff with us and he also wrote articles, some of which bear his name. At that time, the *Solia Newspaper* was a monthly publication. The original paper had been established by the first Bishop, Policarp Morușca, in 1936. English was added by Reverend Fr Vasile Hațegan of Cleveland so the young generation would have knowledge of the faith in a language they understood better than Romanian.

With fresh ideas and theological basis, we established "The Orthodox Radio Hour" in English and Romanian transmitted via cassette tapes to the radio station. Father Mark and I were the American-English staff and Fr Roman was the sole artist for Romanian. One time, we decided to embellish the program with background music until one of the listeners stated that some music interfered with the words. We then stopped our inventive addition. We did have some good comments in English. There were Romanian critics because Fr Roman espoused "frequent reception" of Holy Communion. There were tapes of the radio hour somewhere, but who knows where they may be now?

Father Roman's American experience as an Archimandrite included learning how to cut grass; go grocery shopping and learning to drive an automobile. I confess I taught him, or at least I think so. Once he started to drive he would go visit parishes and even came with me to visit my family in Aurora, Illinois.

Father Roman further accommodated to Chancery work, the

Vatra—the Episcopal residence—to office work, kitchen duty and meeting guests, the laity American/Romanians and Romanian immigrants. He met with the Episcopate Auxiliaries of the Women, and the Youth. He was also present at and participated in the Annual Summer Camps and diocesan events. People loved him and would seek out his counsel.

At one point, Frs Roman, Mark and I set out on a monastic venture. We proposed to serve the Youngstown parish as a monastic community, but it did not pan out. Also, we met the family which owned the Hiram, Ohio, facility for a monastic community. Because this was also a senior home and there would be tension between that administration and the monastery it, too, was a "no go."

What became evident to all was that Fr Roman Braga was an "unsung hero" who could see through a person's façade to what the person really was. He loved, in spite of the years in prison, and did not want to talk about them nor publicize his experiences.

From the almost daily contact with Fr Roman for about three years, I rarely saw him after I was assigned by the Archbishop to the Hermitage, PA parish—Holy Cross—from 1975 to 1981. We saw one another at Episcopate events. I understood that he had a visit from his sister, Reverend Mother Benedicta in 1976 and that they made a "Cross-country" trip which included visits to the Grant Canyon, San Francisco to St John Maximovitch, and then to Ellwood City Monastery, Holy Transfiguration.

Time came when Archbishop Valerian was feeling the burden of an expanded Episcopate which encompassed parishes across the North American continent. He wrote a letter which I call, "The Triumvirate Letter," inasmuch as it was addressed to three clergy of his Episcopate: Archimandrite Martinian Ivanovici, Archimandrite Roman Braga, and priest, Nathaniel Popp. The letter addressed the Archbishop's need for assistance and he asked that none of the three of us reject his invitation to be candidates through the Episcopate Council and then Congress. We were, as is now stated, "vetted." The Electoral Congress was held in Cleveland, OH at the St Mary Church (now St Mary's Cathedral). Two of the candidates— Archimandrite Martinian Ivanovici, and Archimandrite Roman Braga—addressed the Congress and stated that ROEA needs a young and American auxiliary bishop.

After my ordination into the episcopacy, my direct contacts with Archimandrite Roman Braga were few and far between; nevertheless, there were some events which brought us together under unusual circumstances. One in particular was the visit of His Eminence, Metropolitan Antonie (Plămădeală) who, while on a visit here suddenly needed a heart operation which took place at the Cleveland Clinic. Both Fr Roman and I were much involved in resolving this unusual event.

Father Roman was assigned by Archbishop Valerian as parish priest, first in Youngstown, OH, at Holy Trinity (1979-1982) and at St George Cathedral in Southfield, MI (1982-1983) and then to the Monastery of Transfiguration in Ellwood City, PA. Later, he transferred to Holy Dormition Monastery in Rives Junction, where we are today.

In 1989/90 the external Romanian community witnessed the "fall of Soviet Communism" in Romania and the beginning of a series of visits to Romania by various groups of clergy and laity of the Episcopate.

The first visit was a "General Pilgrimage" in May 1994, when our group visited monasteries and dioceses, spoke with monastics and clergy about the new state of the nation. Father Roman was welcomed as a brother who had come home to visit and although joyful, he did not state that he would like to return.

The following year, 1995, we were invited by His Holiness, Patriarch Teoctist to the special Anniversary of the Romanian Patriarchate but Fr Roman did not go with me. In 2003, we did participate in the dedication in Săpânța-Peri of the tallest wooden church in Europe; there, we venerated the miraculous icon of the Mother of God, after which he and I had visits with Metropolitan Antonie Plămădeală of Sibiu and with Metropolitan Batholomew Anania of Cluj. At the conclusion of that segment of the trip we went to Paris to the Romanian parish, Archangels Michael and Gabriel. On a side-trip to Mount Sainte Michele, he and I were walking up the street to the Benedictine Monastery which was the reason for the trip. We were in cassocks. At least three times someone came up to us and shouted that it was not legal/acceptable to wear cassocks in public. It seemed to me that Fr Roman was sorely distressed by these rebuttals in a "free" nation.

It was a joy for Archimandrite Roman when, at an Episcopate Congress he served with his friend, Archimandrite Sofian Boghiu who

was visiting at the time. Then, Fr Roman returned and nestled at Dormition Monastery, where we are now. My episcopacy did not allow me further rare moments together, Archimandrite Roman and me.

The Final Farewell: After the long journey from Cetățuia Monastery in Romania to the monastery in Rives, Roman Braga was laid to rest in the monastery cemetery—sung by nuns, carried by monks. I think that if there is a theme song for our Holy Father Witness to the Faith Roman Braga, it is this:

> *It is the day of resurrection! Let us reflect the feast, and let us embrace one another. Let us say brothers to them that hate us, 'Let us forgive all things for the resurrection.' And thus we can cry out: 'Christ is risen from the dead! By death, has he trampled down death and on those in the tombs he has bestowed life!' Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and on those in the tombs, bestowing life.*

Certainly, Roman Braga has been bestowed life…

THE DISCIPLINE OF PRAYER IN THE MODERN WORLD

Metropolitan TIKHON
Archbishop of Washington,
Metropolitan of All America and Canada

Your Eminence, Archbishop Nathaniel, Your Eminence, Archbishop Daniel, Your Grace, Bishop Andrei, Very Reverend Abbess, Mother Gabriella, and the sisters in Christ with you, Very Reverend and Reverend Fathers, Beloved monastics and faithful friends of Dormition Monastery and of Fr Roman,

Christ is risen!

It is a great blessing to be with you during these days of paschal joy as we honor the memory of Archimandrite Roman Braga, of blessed memory, on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of his repose. I am grateful for the invitation of His Eminence Archbishop Nathaniel to be with you and to offer these brief words about the discipline of prayer in the modern world. I hope that my words will reflect, if only in the superficial manner that I can manage, the spirit of prayer that Fr Roman embodied in his life and reflected in his spiritually-inspiring words and writings.

Although I encountered Fr Roman personally only on a few occasions, I have been edified by his writings and the stories that have been shared about him by those who knew him well. Many of you gathered here had more opportunities to speak with Fr Roman, to receive his counsel, to be in his presence. As we heard so clearly in the words shared with us last evening by Fr Joseph and Mother Christophora, there was much that Fr Roman contained in himself, in his heart—and he shared a lot of that. But as Mother Christophora pointed out, what came out of Fr Roman, what he offered to the rest of us, was the fruit of his eperience. And this is reflected in sometimes paradoxical ways. For example, I vividly recall the time Fr Roman visited my monastery, the monastery of St Tikhon of Zadonsk in South Canaan, Pennsylvania. He had arrived with some of the sisters

in time for Vespers in the monastery church. As is the custom in many places, the meal (trapeza) was scheduled to take place immediately after Vespers, after which the brotherhood would return to the temple for Small Compline. I had informed Fr Roman of this schedule but he decided that he wanted to walk down to the well in order to speak with some of his spiritual children. I was a novice at the time and the monk in charged sent me out to remind Fr Roman that it was time for the meal. However, Fr Roman continued on his way towards the well.

I am grateful that each of you has taken the time to come to the events of this weekend and to gather at this sacred monastery in order to honor our beloved Fr Roman. Of course, it has been 10 years since he has departed this earthly life and has gone to join the other holy confessors of the Church in the heavenly mansions. Nevertheless, his presence remains strong with us in many ways, not least of which through this very monastery which not only is the resting place for his earthly remains but continues to radiate with the grace he brought to this community by his presence, by his words, and by his prayers.

As the title of my talk indicates, I would like to focus on prayer, and, more specifically, the question: How can we, who live in the very complex world of the year 2025, establish a discipline of prayer? There are many other questions that flow from this fundamental question: how do we approach prayer? What are the obstacles to prayer that we encounter? Where should we pray? For how long should we pray? Do we know why we pray? In wrestling with these questions, we confront the paradox of prayer. Prayer is a paradox, something that is at once very easy and very difficult, spiritually inspiring and mentally exhausting. We must come to terms with our own attitudes towards prayer, to sift our contradictory thoughts about it, as we vacillate between a strong desire to pray and an aversion to prayer, between finding joy in prayer and being impatient with our own meager ability to pray, between the peace of acquiring true prayer and the anxiety of feeling abandoned by God. In all these ways, prayer is indeed a paradox—not because prayer itself is paradoxical, of course—but because prayer draws out our own paradoxical attitude towards it.

I would like to begin with one of the most basic paradox-

es concerning prayer, which is that we commonly understand prayer both as something that is easy and as something that is quite difficult. Prayer can be perceived as easy in the sense that the word "prayer" in all its forms—whether it is used as a verb, a noun, or an adjective—is ubiquitous, not only in the church but even in our culture and our civil discourse. Prayer is referenced in passing in almost every context imaginable, either promoted as a cure-all for society's ills or dismissed as an ineffective alternative to real political action. This approach to prayer is rather superficial and, from our Orthodox perspective, does not reflect the depths of power and beauty that is found in our understanding and, more importantly, our experience of prayer. Nevertheless, even we Orthodox sometimes adopt this superficial attitude concerning the ease of prayer, both with ourselves and in our interactions with others: "How are you doing?" "Well, by your prayers." "Please pray for me" or "I will keep you in my prayers" or "Please keep so and so in your prayers." We also hear and utter calls to prayer countless times in the divine services: "In peace let us pray to the Lord," "Let my prayer arise" etc. Prayer is what we do as Christians and this reality might seem to imply that prayer is easy to accomplish. And, in many ways prayer is easy, but at the same time it can become too easy, meaning that sometimes we happily rely on the superficial aspect of prayer, being content to tell others that we are praying for them when perhaps we are not, or saying our prayers very quickly and hoping that they count as something.

Allow me to read something which Fr Roman shared in his book, "Exploring the Inner Universe," as an answer to a question about his family life:

> *Close to my family's house there was a monastery with eighty monks, and I think this was not just a coincidence. The first spiritual person in my life was my mother, who knew the Psalter by heart. In her youth she had wanted to be a nun, but according to the custom at that time, she obeyed her parents and married a man, who, fortunately, understood her spiritual inclinations. So our house was like a chapel—the walls were full of icons and the shelves full of service books. She was obedient to her parents and accepted the marriage, but she never forgot that she wanted to be a nun; this is why my father bought all these church books for her. I can say that we lived in our family*

like in a monastery.

When we hear this today, in the twenty-first century, in North America, near the busy city of Detroit, in a place to where we all travelled in airplanes or cars, we might rightly say: "What a blessing Fr Roman had to grow up in this beautiful and prayerful environment where his house was like a chapel and his family lived like they were in a monastery." We might further be tempted to say: "Prayer must have been easy for him in that context. But I live in the modern world, where I am distracted by my work, by the internet, by traffic, by my mobile phone. If I had only grown up in the same environment that Fr Roman was raised, prayer would be easy for me."

This leads us to the other pole of the paradox, which is that prayer is lofty, daunting, and often *difficult*. And for these reasons, because prayer is a lofty theological concept in our Orthodox tradition, a practice that is advocated by the Lord himself in the Gospel, by the Apostles, and practiced in very intense ways by all the saints, we may be afraid to approach prayer, to enter into prayer. Sometimes we may even avoid prayer precisely because we know that it is something powerful and something remarkable. Saint Sophrony of Essex writes that *Prayer is infinite creation, far superior to any form of art or science.* And Archimandrite Aemilianos says that *Prayer is the journey of the soul toward God, the purpose being to reach him and be united with him.* A more expansive definition is provided by St John of the Ladder:

> *Prayer, by reason of its nature, is the converse and union of man with God, and by reason of its action upholds the world and brings about reconciliation with God; it is the mother and also the daughter of tears, the propitiation for sins, a bridge over temptations, a wall against afflictions, a crushing of conflicts, a work of angels, the food of all the bodiless spirits, future gladness, unending activity, a source of virtues, a means of obtaining graces, invisible progress, food of the soul, enlightenment of the mind, an axe against despair, a demonstration of hope, a cure for sorrow, the wealth of monks, the treasure of hesychasts, the reduction of anger, the mirror of progress.*

There is a lot that is contained in these, and similar definitions and descriptions of prayer found in the patristic literature.

On a very fundamental level, we can recognize that these words are not just fancy poetry but are, in fact, a reflection of the many facets of the experience of prayer.

I am confident that this was the same for Fr Roman—his deep life of prayer came from experience, and this experience took place in different contexts. Some of his experience came from his early childhood, as we have seen, and some of his experience came later in life, when he was imprisoned and treated harshly by various civil authorities and others, and still other experiences came in the days he spent at this very monastery. Many of these experiences are wonderfully captured in Dr Daniel Hinshaw's book, "Journey to Simplicity." We have also heard personal accounts and stories about Fr Roman and of Fr Roman's experience. No one, of course, can fully experience what another person experiences. But there is nevertheless a mysterious form of communication that takes place in the Church when we pray together in Church, when we read spiritual works or the lives of the saints, or when we gather together to hear about a saintly person such as Fr Roman.

When we hear about Fr Roman's experience, we might think that prayer is difficult. Certainly, prayer requires effort, as Fr Roman further writes:

> *I do not know how God works, but looking back, I see that there were certain things that were significant in shaping my future. Maybe for others, they did not seem so important. For example, we were participating in long, long monastic services and I was often tired. I used to pull my mother's dress, asking to go home; I could not go on anymore I was so tired. But my mother was drinking in every word of the service; countrymen are like this; they are used to listening and this is why she told me: "You have to be tired in Church. It is the least you can do for Jesus Christ; He died on the Cross for us."*

I mention this to underline that, in many fundamental ways, prayer is both *easy* and *difficult* at the same time. As human beings, we may experience one or the other poles (when we feel God's grace and are uplifted in our hearts, then prayer is easy, but when the service is going on for a long time or we are tired at the end of the day, prayer is difficult). We may say: "I am just a

simple person who has no theological expertise and who did not grow up in a monastery, how can I really pray, like Fr Roman?" I would suggest that it is precisely when we encounter a man of prayer, as Fr Roman was, that the rest of us, who struggle with prayer, find inspiration and encouragement. Even if intellectually, we know that prayer, in the deepest Orthodox understanding, is a profound and meaningful component of our lives as Christians, one only has to consult any number of scriptural passages, patristic writings, both ancient and modern, to recognize that prayer is not something to be approached lightly. It is, in fact, one of the deepest mysteries of our Christian faith, one which opens us to, or leads us towards, all the other deep mysteries of our communion with God.

So what do we do about our experience of prayer? I would suggest that we don't need to do anything about it other than to accept it as part of our experience of prayer. We each live in a particular place and time, and each of us has a unique experience of life in general. We may feel, at times, that our circumstances do not lend themselves to prayer. We may say to ourselves: "I have to work, go to school, take care of my family, go shopping, answer emails, and all the other activities of life. I don't have time to pray and, more than that, I did not have the spiritual upbringing that someone like Fr Roman had." But here is what Fr Roman himself says:

> *Besides the fairy tales that we read in our childhood to develop our imagination, we were obligated to read the Psalter, the Book of Hours, the Triodion, the Pentecostarion and the Lives of the Saints. My father did not buy the twelve volume Menaion because he thought this cost too much. When I was five years old, I was able to read the Akathist to St Mary Magdalene in the Cyrillic alphabet; this was my primer. We were normal children, very active, getting into mischief like anyone else, but my mother gave us as penance the reading of one or two kathismas—no spanking or other punishments. In time we used to do these readings with pleasure.*

Let me point out a couple of things. First, although it seems that the children read many spiritual books (which is very impressive), they also read fairy tales. Further, Fr Roman notes that they were normal children, very active, and getting into trouble like anyone else.This is encouraging for those of us who

may feel that we are not monks or spiritual people but just normal people. It reminds us that even normal people can do both the normal ordinary things of life and also enter deeply into the extraordinary act of prayer.

The second point I would highlight is that Fr Roman mentions that the children were obligated to read many spiritual books. So there was an element of something being compulsory "you are obligated, you must, read the Psalter, the Triodion, etc." This is often what we today interpret as prayer being "difficult." It is something that we don't really want to do but feel that we are being told that we should. Even if no one is actually forcing us to read or to pray, we often look at prayer as something we "have to do," as something the Lord expects of us, or even as something that the Church requires of us. If we look at prayer in this way, then in many ways we are turning prayer into some form of punishment, which, of course, it is not.

On that point, I like to note that Fr Roman mentions there was no spanking or other punishments for when the children got into mischief. Rather, their penance was to read the Psalter and this penance (which is also something we sometimes wrongly interpret in our modern context as a form of punishment) was perhaps not, in fact, a punishment, but an encouragement to prayer. We can see this because Fr Roman significantly concludes by saying: *In time we used to do these readings with pleasure.* The idea of prayer seems to make it difficult but the act of prayer reveals it to be something that is easy and even pleasant. Even though this little anecdote from the early life of Fr Roman is simple, it is a very apt illustration of how prayer can be both difficult and easy. Prayer can be at once the more lofty of spiritual experience but come about through the most simple gesture, movement of the heart, or reading of a verse from the psalms.

In my own life, I have many times asked myself whether I have remained a monk as a bishop, but I have asked this perhaps no more intently than when approaching the topic of prayer: If it was hard to pray in the monastery, how can I expect to pray as a bishop? If prayer is such an inspiring and uplifting work, why does it seem that there are so many obstacles to prayer? And how do I overcome those obstacles? As a young novice, one of

the most recurring thoughts I had was to leave the monastery, to go somewhere else where the community life was better ordered, where there were less distractions to prayer, where there were more holy people. After some time, I recognized that it was not the place that was the obstacle, but myself. It took me many years, and quite a bit of searching, both physically and internally, to recognize that the primary battle needed to be waged within my own heart.

Each of us has a particular experience of the difficulties of life. Fr Roman himself, of course, encountered many difficulties. His experience was his own, it was unique, but in many ways it was also universal. At the same time, as we know, Fr Roman did not speak much of those difficulties. But perhaps the following account from the life of the Serbian bishop, St Nikolai (Velimirovich), who suffered during the Second World War, might give a glimpse of what Fr Roman may have experienced. During the Second World War. Saint Nicholai was imprisoned in the Dachau Concentration camp. Later, when asked how he endured the hardships and sufferings there, he replied:

> *You sit in the corner and say over and over again: I am dust, I am ashes: take my soul' and suddenly your soul is taken up and sees God face to face. But you cannot endure this, and you say to Him: 'I am not ready, I can't.... Send me back.' And so once more you sit there, for hours on end, repeating: 'I am dust, I am ashes, take my soul,' and once more, the Lord catches you up. Were it possible, I would exchange what remains of my life for one more hour in Auschwitz.*

Who of us can imagine that depth of inner humility and that height of heavenly ascent. Yet each of us suffers in our own personal way, from external circumstances or from brokenness of heart, sometimes experiencing the depths of hell itself.

We who live in the modern world are familiar with many forms of external obstacles to prayer: the unceasing cycle of news stories and "breaking news," the invasive reality of entertainment options of all sorts, the eternal presence of electronic communication, and the addictive nature of social media. In no small part because of this constant stream of news and content, our mind is often preoccupied with the "big issues" of the world. With the worries of the globe constantly before our eyes

and on our minds, in recent years, we may have felt that the pandemic, for example, as well as other geopolitical conflicts, or domestic uncertainty were, and are, threats to our churchly existence and to our life of prayer. But it seems to me that, for all the significance of those broader challenges, it is really the growing multiplicity of these daily interruptions that pose the greatest obstacle to prayer.

We all can suffer from the busyness of life; we get overwhelmed, we get tired, we get frustrated with our family or with our friends. All of these can certainly become obstacles to prayer. But when you place them in the context of our hyper digitized environment, it seems that our own passions—which we all have and all must deal with—take on even more dreadful and pernicious forms, turning our busyness into laziness, our concern for others into a desire to flee from them and their problems, and our disagreements with our brothers into anger. In other words, it seems evident that our hyper digitized environment brings us even more directly into a world of thoughts, a world in which the imprints of the passions become more pronounced, rather than less so. So, how does one turn from all of that and enter into prayer?

One of the most fundamental approaches we can take is one of *humility*. Towards the beginning of the "Ladder," St John Climacus writes about the spiritual struggle in general, but this can apply to prayer in particular:

> *I am fully aware, my good friends, that the struggles I have described will seem to some incredible, to others hard to believe, and will seem to some to breed despair. But to the courageous soul they will serve as a spur and as a shaft of fire; and he will go away carrying zeal in his heart. He who is not up to this will realize his infirmity, and having easily obtained humility by self-reproach, he will run after the former; and I do not know whether he may not even overtake them. But the careless man should leave my stories alone, lest he despair and squander even the little he has accomplished, and thus correspond to the man of whom it was said: "But from him that hath no desire or eagerness, even what he hath will be taken away from him."*

You will note that St John here is describing three types of souls: the first is the courageous soul that is spurred on to zeal for the spiritual life by the remarkable accounts of the saints, the third is the careless man who might be led to despair and therefore should leave these stories alone. But the second is the one who, although not up to such great spiritual feats, obtains humility by self-reproach. And with this humility, he will run after the more zealous and perhaps even overtake them.

This second path is a very encouraging path for all of us, and it is particularly easy to implement in terms of the life of prayer. I myself, when I started out in the monastic life, was sometimes jealous of others—some who were smarter than me, others who seemed wiser than me, or those who had certain gifts. I kept this jealousy in my heart and it did not help me in any way. But, on one of my pilgrimages to the Holy Mountain, I had the opportunity to speak with Archimandrite Aemilianos at Simonos Petra Monastery who said to me: *The various charisms and feats of others, these are human accomplishments. Do not try to beat the others in these human accomplishments but rather try to outdo them in prayer. With such prayer, you should not look to the others as competitors but simply smile with everyone, have peace in your heart, and consider everyone to be better than you*. With these brief words, Fr Aemilianos both shattered my captivity to those particular thughts of jealousy and encouraged me to prayer, and directed me towards the path of humility. I think this is what Fr Roman reminds us of as well.

We must link prayer with other activities. If you are like me, we tend to isolate prayer as its own insulated activity, something to be accomplished in our prayer corner in the morning or the evening, something to be done before and after we receive communion, something to be offered in times of gratitude or times of trial. In other words, we see it as an obligation, the fulfillment of an invisible requirement, perhaps a box to check off of our to-do list. It is an approach that ultimately stifles prayer and forces us to say: "I must do this (prayer) first and then I will be able to accomplish that (serve the divine liturgy, write a sermon, hear a confession, give advice, etc). But then, when we fail to pray, we feel guilty and then try to rationalize ourselves: 'at least I read one prayer.'"

However, this same Archimandrite Aemilianos writes in one of his books:

> *"In speaking of prayer, we must say that prayer is not something that stands on its own… I cannot say 'I pray' if my prayer is not connected to something else. There are some things that always go together."* Here he mentions Saint Paul's emphasis on faith to the exclusion of works and Saint James' emphasis on works to the exclusion of faith with the conclusion is that both are necessary—"*faith has no meaning without works and works are a proof of faith."* And thus, the elder continues, *"prayer is linked to our worship and especially with Holy Communion. If there is no worship and no holy communion, there can be no prayer… If on the other hand, there is worship divorced from intense, spiritual prayer—internal, powerful prayer which cries out—you can be certain that our worship and our communion is in vain."*

We can see this reflected in the life of Fr Roman, especially in his time while imprisoned, where he and the others would memorize the scriptures as a means of living their faith and finding hope.

One form of encouragement to prayer is *reading*. When I first came to seminary in 1989, some of my fellow seminarians had the practice of getting together in each other's rooms or in the seminary chapel in order to pray or to read together some of the writings of the fathers. One of the most inspiring was reading through the long Kontakia of St Romanos the Melodist during Lent and Holy Week. Another practice some of us adopted was reading the lives of the saints that were appointed for each day. At that time, the short lives of the saints from the Prologue from Ochrid of St Nicholai Velimirovich were read at lunch for the seminarians. Some of us wanted to have some more of this so we would read the fuller lives that were available at the time. Later, when I entered the monastery this practice was, of course, continued since such readings at meals and in the trapeza are a mainstay of the daily monastic life. When I travelled to the Holy Mountain in 1991, I very proudly told one of the monks there that I read the lives of the saints every day.

But Fr Macarios told me that it was not enough to read the lives of the saints, which only convey the external aspects of their existence. To that, I should also join the reading of the ascetical and theological writings of the Church because these illumine the lives of the saints. Without understanding the theory of the ascetical life, one cannot understand the lives of the saints.

Encouragement to prayer is *simplicity*. I would say that this principle can apply not just to monastics—who have the time and the luxury to read more books—but to all Christians. It is not only helpful for us to read about prayer in books but this practice can, in fact, help encourage us to actually pray. At the same time, we must be honest with ourselves when we read the writings of the fathers. As Fr Symeon the Peruvian said to me: *One must learn the fathers so as to forget them. That is to say, one must learn their spirit and afterwards live what they say. It's just like an automobile: in order to learn how to drive, we must learn the rules, but when we actually drive, we forget the rules and simply drive. If one focuses on the rules, one cannot actually drive.* This is similar, I think, to the kind of advice Fr Roman would give, reminding us to not get trapped in the externals of things but rather to live in as authentic a manner as possible.

Do not seek perfection in prayer. Prayer is not an isolated practice. It is not something that we have to "master" at the outset but rather something that reaches its fulness through time. I like to recall some advice I recently received, and which I shared with the clergy at the recent retreat in Chicago. This year, I served the funeral for Matushka Delores Donlick, wife of Archpriest Daniel Donlick, Academic Dean Emeritus of St Tikhon Seminary. At the repast following the funeral, Fr Daniel told me that, since his retirement and with the onset of various physical ailments, he had taken to praying more often, praying more fervently—to the point where his wife, Matushka Delores, would take note and would even question his need to pray so often. And Fr Daniel said to me, as he said to her, that he was praying more fervently at this stage of his life because he was not able to pray so much during the active years of his priestly ministry. "You know, Vladyka, it's hard to find time to pray when you are a priest—serving the liturgy, preparing sermons,

visiting the sick, tending to problems of various kinds. Now I am making up for my neglect of prayer by praying more now that I have the time."

As a concluding point, I like to return now to what I think is the primary obstacle to prayer, which is discouragement. The antidote to discouragement is finding the courage to begin to pray. But beyond the beginning, we need to find the courage to continue to pray, which means that we need to find the courage to stand in the presence of God, to quiet our thoughts and open ourselves up so that the grace of the Holy Spirit might descent into our hearts and fill our lives. It takes courage to be honest with ourselves, to know and acknowledge our weaknesses and our failings, to be overwhelmed by the demands of our ministry, and yet to nevertheless make an effort to enter into prayer. It takes courage to persevere in that prayer, feeble though it may be, in the face of the temptations of the flesh, of the world, and of the devil. It also takes courage to know when it is time to pull back and to rest. One of the most encouraging psalm verses for me is *I laid down and slept, I awoke for the Lord will help me.* To me, this is the psalmist's honest assessment of his own weakness, a recognition that, in times of trouble or in times of weariness, it is acceptable to rest, but to rest with the knowledge that the Lord stands ready to help him upon waking. It is the same with us and with our life of prayer. Saint Sophrony was known to say, echoing the words of St Silouan, "keep your mind in hell and do not despair," that one should keep oneself as close to the abyss as possible and then have a cup of coffee.

This advice, it seems to me, is very similar to something Fr Roman might say. I would therefore encourage everyone to read about prayer, to strive to pray more often, to create those moments of external and internal silence in order to foster prayer, to attend more divine services to fan the flames of your personal prayer, and to serve your brothers and sisters sacrificially and prayerfully, and when the time is appropriate, sit back and enjoy a cup of coffee to the glory of God.

Thank you for your patience and for your attention.
Christ is Risen!

THE FUTURE OF ORTHODOXY IN NORTH AMERICA

Archbishop DANIEL
Orthodox Church in America, Midwest Diocese

Your Beatitude, Your Eminence, Your Grace, Mother Gabriella, Mother Christophora, Monastics, Fathers, Sisters, and Brothers:

HRISTOS A ÎNVIAT!

I am deeply honored and grateful to have been invited to this commemorative celebration in honor of the Tenth Anniversary of the repose of the Very Reverend Archimandrite Roman Braga. May he be granted rest with the Saints in the Kingdom of Heaven!

Father Roman is well known throughout the world, possibly even more known since his repose than before, especially in more recent time with the publication of Dr Daniel Hinshaw's book "Journey to Simplicity: The Life and Wisdom of Archimandrite Roman Braga." Father Roman is remembered as a priest and monk, as a sufferer for and a confessor of the faith in the face of communism—and its obsession with destroying the role of the Church in society—as a pastor and teacher, a teacher of the ways of prayer, as a musician and translator of liturgical texts, as an Orthodox Christian man who lived what he taught and, for many of you here today, as a highly-revered Spiritual Father. And I would add to this list, this litany, that Fr Roman was also a visionary, especially as it relates to the topic on which I will present: *Orthodox Unity in North America*.

He is known by many of you personally: he possibly gave some of you "a word," maybe on many occasions, as he instructed you in a practical way in the ways of faith and Christian life, he heard your words of repentance in Holy Confession and offered you the comforting words of forgiveness as he prayed the prayer of absolution over you. He was, truly, to so many of you here present and even to many around the world, a beloved Spiritual Father. A Father who knew you and loved you

and cared for you in the ways that really matter. A Spiritual Father whose principal commitment and desire was to assist you on the way to the Kingdom of Heaven.

Although I have been invited to speak here today, I had little personal interaction with Fr Roman. Of course, I met Fr Roman here at the monastery several times. I asked for his prayers. But he never offered me a "word of wisdom" or "counsel;" and I never asked for this. What little verbal exchange we had was fairly routine and mundane. "Beautiful Liturgy. Nice day. Father, how are you doing today?" "The church looks more beautiful each time I come here, etc." But we never really had any type of in-depth or spiritually significant conversation.

Nonetheless, Fr Roman spoke to me in other ways. Elderly and somewhat broken in body—as old age does to all of us—he spoke to me through his prayerful presence at the Divine Services here in the Monastery Church. He was already in a wheelchair, as I recall, the first time I saw him. Knowing his name and the esteem in which I knew him to be held by so many, I took time to study him, sitting there, in front of the iconostas, clearly deep in prayers. Seeing him in church, praying during the Divine Services, was a great inspiration for me. I saw seated there a man of the Church, a faithful Christian who had suffered much for the Church, someone whose love for Christ and the Church had been a source of healing and strength and peace, not only for himself, but for countless others as well. This is how I remember Fr Roman. He never gave me a "word" but, nonetheless, he spoke to me very loudly and very clearly. His unspoken word is what I take from Fr Roman: his "word" to me was without words.

I also want to mention that I was here at Dormition Monastery on the day that Fr Roman was called to the Kingdom of Heaven. As it happened, the Statute Revision Committee was meeting here for its last meeting before submitting the final draft of the new statute of Orthodox Church in America to the All-American Council for its adoption. His Eminence Archbishop Nathaniel was the chair of the committee, and we had already enjoyed the hospitality of Mother Gabriela and the Sisterhood on several previous occasions. At the time, there was

the sense that Fr Roman was "actively dying" and that the time of his repose was imminently near. Doctor Hinshaw was also here, helping the sisters care for Fr Roman during his last days and hours.

I recall that before going to bed in the evening I prayed that the Lord would grant Fr Roman a peaceful repose. The next morning, I went to the church early for Matins and Liturgy, as I recall about 5:00 am, and was surprised to find that Fr Roman's body had already been prepared for burial, laid out in his coffin and placed in the center of the church before the Royal Doors. It did not seem odd or off-putting, but everything seemed so peaceful and natural and simple and humble. His Eminence Archbishop Nathaniel invited me to concelebrate with him the first Divine Liturgy in which the Church prayed for the peaceful repose of Fr Roman's soul and prayed that his memory would be eternal. Again, a man of the Church who lived his life, confessed Christ, and by his death, a churchly death, surrounded and supported by the prayers of the Church, he instructed his spiritual sons and daughters in the way of Christian life—eternal life.

Allow me to now focus more on my topic. The specific topic or theme which was given me is "The Future of North American Orthodoxy." This is a topic that is very timely—as it has really always been timely since the planting of the Church in North America first took place by the Russian monastic missionaries, of whom St Herman is the most well-known. It is also a topic that was very dear to Fr Roman, a Romanian hieromonk who came to live and witness to the Orthodox faith here in North America.

Born in a land whose Orthodox roots are very deep and very old, we know the history of how Fr Roman's life evolved and how, eventually, at the direction of the Patriarch left Romania, where his presence was too provocative to the Communist government. And, by God's will, how he ended up first in Brazil and then ended up living the rest of his life and serving the Church here in America.

Father Roman arrived to the United States in 1972, having been invited by Archbishop Valerian (Trifa) of the Romanian

Orthodox Episcopate of America to come and serve the Church here. He came to love this land and the promise it holds, especially concerning the possibilities and promises it holds for the people of this land.

Although Fr Roman acknowledged that, as a monk, his primary call was not to be a parish priest, but he, nonetheless was active in parish ministry. He worked for the Romanian Episcopate by translating Romanian Church music and liturgical texts into English. He was active in developing a religious education curriculum for children. He served in various parishes throughout the United States and Canada. Basically, he served where he was asked to serve before his ministry at Holy Transfiguration Monastery in Ellwood City and then at Dormition Monastery here in Rives Junction. So he had a broad spectrum of the experience of Church life here in America. And from his writing we can see that he had great insight into the reality of what it means to be an Orthodox Christian living in the West.

It is interesting to note that at the time of his repose, the official Romanian Orthodox Church website (basilica.ro) referred to his move to Brazil and then to the United States as a missionary effort, stating that he had been sent here as an effort to bring the fullness of the Gospel to the peoples of this continent. He came here as a monk and missionary for the building up of the Church here in America. Indeed, in one of his many interviews over the years, he spoke of America as a place of mission, even using that very specific word:

> *We, as Orthodox in America, have a mission: to change the direction of knowledge, because the West, of which America is a part, is outward looking. Westerners explore the universe outside themselves. The mission of Orthodox is to turn man's attention inward, to tell him that there is an inner dimension…*

He clearly identifies himself as an American and goes on to say:

> *"I'll give you an example of American Christianity: We have children's camps in the summer, religious camps, you call them, we bring the children here to learn religion. Because in America they do not teach religion in public schools. It has never been taught. Not because America is not religious or*

> *against the church, but because there are 1200 sects and then you don't know what kind of religion to teach in schools. And the state, which respects the church on certain levels (we don't pay taxes, we don't pay property taxes…) has refused to put religion in schools because they don't know what to teach."*

In the same interview, he continues:

> *A little while back, we had a children's camp and we had a young girl who was constantly listening to two radios: one on the right, the other on the left, with two headphones, one in the left ear and one in the right ear, probably two programs, one music and one sports. And I said, 'Turn them off!' And you know what she said? 'Father, if I turn them off, I will go mad.' What a tragedy for a 14-year-old girl to say that! 'But can't you sit on that bench? Just sit for an hour?' 'But what can I do?' Do nothing, sit and be quiet, maybe God wants to speak to you!*
>
> *You see, this is the role of Orthodoxy in Western culture. Not to let the world know us. We are often proud to say that we have Orthodox Christians in the West, in France, in Germany, in America. So what? That's not why God sent us there. He sent us there to open the doors of true knowledge, to open the doors of the Church.*

Of course, we must acknowledge, as Fr Roman did, that to do the work of the Church, to preach the Gospel, making disciples of all nations and bringing them into the life of the Holy Trinity, or, more simply, to teach people how to listen to the voice of God as he speaks to them, requires unity, not just a spiritualized or idealized sense of unity, but a true, lived, and experienced unity. It's an all-too-often unspoken truth: If we want to open the doors of the Orthodox Church (and the doors of true knowledge of which he spoke), we must live in unity and be a united Church with no divisions, admitting for nothing that separates or divides. Indeed, in the Creed we proclaim the marks of the Church: it is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. Thus, we profess and confess that Orthodoxy, that the Church is one, it is united in one faith and one Lord and must respond to the world by bearing witness to this very unity.

However, Fr's concept of unity and how it is to be achieved was different than we ourselves usually think when we reflect upon this topic. For Fr Roman, unity—in an administrative sense—it something to be achieved by bishops and primates. He even stated, quite boldly, that this unity would only happen if the Greek and the Russian patriarchs (and others by implication) would first kneel in front of one another and beg forgiveness. A very striking and compelling image, to be sure! Father Roman, however, also was mindful of unity on a deeper, more inward level. Unity for the Church is to be reflective of the unity of the Trinity.

As we already know, Fr Roman arrived in America in 1972, over fifty years ago. He arrived here during a time of great Orthodox outward-looking activity in North America. The Autocephalous Orthodox Church in America was only two years old, having received autocephaly in 1970. The very existence of this new autocephalous Church quickly became the source of turmoil for many of the ethnic Orthodox Churches also present in America at the time. Indeed, an act which was aimed at stabilizing and promoting good canonical order and which offered hoped-for unity became the source of confusion for some, resulting in doubts and division for a good period of time. (And still it is not fully resolved.)

However, Fr Roman was able to see what was the most important… because he had a vision concerning the Church and its unity. And he saw it as something attainable. He understood that the Church in America, while retaining the fullness of the Orthodox Tradition and Orthodox Faith, should also develop into something that is unique. Its own special expression of Orthodoxy. An American expression of the ancient Apostolic Faith. He wrote:

> *As a priest, I believe that God send us to this beautiful country to plant Orthodoxy and to acclimatize it. It would be regrettable to retreat into the shell or the borders of our own ethnic groups and to consider Orthodoxy as a tool for the preservation of a national identity and cultural traditions in this country. We must not use Orthodoxy as an instrument to resist assimilation into American society. This would be a sin… The Church has her own*

purpose for existence. It is necessary for America to find its own place in Orthodox life, a proper style and method of expression.

Letting Fr Roman speak for himself on this further:

When Jesus sent the twelve apostles to preach in the world, he did not tell them that they must resist assimilation into the local society… keep their Jewish identity, purity of race, language, or customs. On the contrary, he said 'Go then to all people everywhere and make them my disciples' (Matthew 28:19). More than that, Saint Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles said 'I became all things to all men that I might save some of them by any means possible. Living among the Jews, I was a Jew, among Gentiles, I lived like a Gentile, among the weak in faith, I became weak in order to win them' (1 Corinthians 9:20-22), So as the Orthodox Christians in America… why don't we put our national feelings, cultural traditions and ethnic traditions aside when we preach Orthodoxy in this country? Only in this way can we raise our voices along with Saint Paul's saying 'Among the Americans I was an American, among the Canadians, I lived like a Canadian… I became all things to all men that I might save some of them.'

These words might be hard to hear, for none of us want to abandon our heritage or our ethnic roots (And indeed, Fr Roman himself wrote that it is important to do so in order for us to be truly ourselves.) Indeed, when people ask us concerning our faith, how do we normally respond? I'm Greek- Romanian-, Russian- Ukrainian- Syrian-, etc. Orthodox? But I need to ask, then what about the Americans who come to our doors looking for the Truth of Orthodoxy only to be first taught how to make spanakopita or piroshki or sarmale as part of their catechumenal instruction? We all know stories about how people never felt particularly ethnic until they started attending an Orthodox church. Father Roman writes of the Swedish American who had never felt Swedish until he went to an Orthodox parish and felt the need to label himself, as everyone else did.

But this great Scriptural insight and Fr Roman's personal perspective, this vision concerning unity in America has remained merely a vision since the time Fr Roman wrote those

lines, quoting from the Holy Scriptures. We must admit to ourselves that, in many ways, as American Orthodox Christians in general have not responded to this exciting call for an American Church. Again, we still take pride in our demonyms, the words we use to self-identify: "I am Greek or Russian Ukrainian or Swedish or Hispanic or Dutch or..." However, Fr Roman emphasizes that, living as we do in America, we must be American, in order to be all things to all people in order for them to be saved. In order for this continent to be converted to the fullness of the Gospel which is Jesus Christ himself.

Where are we today? By means of our gathering for this conference, we are commemorating the tenth anniversary of Fr Roman's departure from this earthly life. His presence and influence remain a part of our experience as a Church, as he is considered more and more as a wise and holy teacher, even a prophet who had a vision of unity and who lived among us. In honoring him and in hearing his words and teachings in this and other presentations, we know the man better than before we arrived here for this conference. We honor his life and legacy, his powerful witness to the Lord and his life of sacrifice. We admit the influence of his prayers, and we value the challenge and power of his teachings.

And, again, we are here to honor Fr's memory. But how can we do that best? How can we best lift up his life as an example and spread his teachings for the wisdom they proclaim? Clearly, the best way to honor him is to embrace his teaching- and from the perspective of this presentation, to honor him by always seeking greater opportunities to work for unity within the Church in America.

There are concrete ways to do this: As you know, all the canonical bishops in this country are members of the Assembly of Canonical Bishops in America. This body, though not a synod, strives to work for administrative unity among all the canonical Churches present in this land. Many are frustrated by its lack of impetus but remain dedicated to moving forward. I personally think that we should follow the advice Fr Roman that I mentioned earlier: all the bishops should be on their knees asking for forgiveness for whatever ways we have failed in bringing about the unity which Christ wants for his Church.

However, there are more practical, maybe more sound ways to do this as well. On the level of the faithful and parishes, we need to retrain our manner of thinking, always thinking of ourselves first as Orthodox Christians. Christians who are working out our salvation within the context of the West, specifically here in North America. And then act accordingly, making all persons of all backgrounds and all ethnicities feel comfortable sitting with us at table.

But, most importantly, if we desire unity, the first step is for all of us to be truly ourselves. To truly become what God has asked of us: persons who are fully alive in Christ Jesus. For it is in us and through us, with our histories, backgrounds, sins and weaknesses, talents and abilities, that the Holy Spirit works, brining others and bringing all of us into the true unity found in the Kingdom.

Of course, the source of all unity is Jesus Christ, our Crucified and Risen Savior. He, who is the source of all unity. As we recently heard proclaimed in the Matins Services of Holy Friday, as Jesus prayed to His Father, asking for the unity of His followers:

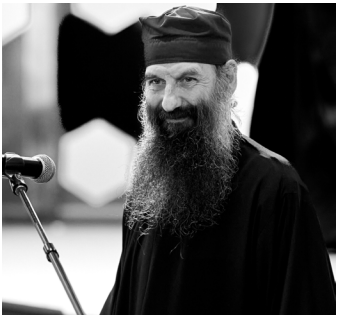
> *I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved me"* (John 17:20-23).

This was certainly the prayer that consumed Fr Roman as he reflected and meditated upon the Church in America, the Church he served for so long, and the Church which he had come to love. That we all may be one: as the Son is in the Father and as we are in the Son.

It is well known that Fr Roman wanted no eulogies at his funeral. And I suspect the words that are being offered in his memory at this conference would be a source of discomfort for him. However, in the eulogy he offered at the memorial repast

on the day of Father Roman's funeral, Fr Lawrence Lazar wrote a very simple, yet very profound line. Speaking of Fr Roman, he said "***He could be a good friend, and he was a good brother.***" Of all the words spoken last evening and today, I think that Fr Roman would cherish those words the most. For in being a good friend and in being a good brother, he led us, and continues to lead us through his prayers and the by the example of his life, on the best path possible, the path to the Kingdom of Heaven.

May he rest with the saints.
May his memory be eternal!



FATHER ROMAN AS I KNEW HIM

Archimandrite JOSEPH
St Gregory Palamas Monastery

Through the prayers of our Holy Fathers Lord Jesus Christ our God have mercy on us and save us. Amen.

It is with joy and not a little trepidation that I hope to give few informal recollections of our beloved Fr Roman. Many of us have our cherished memories of Fr Roman; perhaps some of these you have shared with me.

Someone once asked me, "What was he like?" My response; "Being with him was like a trip to a high mountain in which you could see the vast beauty of the earth or like a visit to the ocean in which you could experience the vastness of the sea and sense the depth of the ocean." Deep peace, joy and optimism could summarize a meeting with Fr Roman and yet while he stood apart for his many good qualities he was very accessible and down to earth. There was nothing pretentious, sentimental or sanctimonious about him. He was very approachable and accessible to anyone who met him.

Little children who would see him in public thought that he was Santa Claus. I remember seeing in St George Romanian Orthodox Cathedral in Southfield, in the hallway between the church and the social hall, pictures of former priests with the various organizations of the parish. In the section of photographs from the time of Fr Roman's pastorate the photographs with Fr Roman and the church council, the women's organization and other adult organizations Fr Roman had a very stern expression on his face. When he was standing with the church school and the youth organizations he had a bright smile that lighted his entire face. It was very clear where he found joy. Father Roman loved everyone but especially it was in children that he saw the innocence, simplicity and goodness for which he strove.

I heard recently a respected abbot say that only the saints

should talk about the saints because only the saints would have a full grasp of the depth of their spiritual struggle and the full bounty of their spiritual gifts. At this point if I were wise I would sit down.

However, Fr Roman was indeed a letter from God, as St Paul said of the Corinthians. *"You yourselves are our letter written on our hearts, known and read by everyone. You show that you are a letter from Christ. . .written not with ink but with the Spirit of the Living God, not on tablets of stone but on human hearts."*(2 Cor 3:2-3). It was obvious that Fr Roman was the true bearer of the Good News of the Gospel in everything that he did. It was also very obvious to anyone who knew Fr Roman that he hated with deep hatred any comments or inferences that he was a saint or saintly.

I remember a time more than 30 years ago when we were sharing an evening meal here in the monastery, in what was then a kitchen/eating area just on the other side of this wall. At the meal I asked him what he thought about a popular spiritual book in which the author reports the testimony of an anonymous elder who describes the experience of the uncreated light. Father Roman immediately and emphatically said "it is not at all like that." To which we took immediate note. There was an embarrassing silence as though he said too much and he went on to speak of something else.

He did speak to a very limited extent about the Communist prison experience. He said that was his most important monastic training *"they teach you obedience, they teach you about fasting, and they teach you that there is only God to depend upon."* The exact cruelties of that experience he did not discuss. Those details came from the writings of others. He disliked the artificial and the spectacular and he certainly did not want to give any false impressions. As some of you know, he wrote in his testament that he did not want a eulogy and he said that the best eulogy was a complete monastic funeral.

Anyone who would meet Fr Roman for the first time, would realize that they were meeting a very unique personality. I am reminded of a passage in the *Life of St Anthony the Great* by St

Athanasius the Great that describe the saint. …

> *His face had a great and marvelous grace, and this grace he had from the Savior—for if he was present with a great number of monks, and if someone who had not formerly met him wished to see him, immediately on arriving he would pass by the others and run to him as though drawn by his eyes. It was not his physical dimensions that distinguished him from the rest, but the stability of character and the purity of soul. His soul being free of confusion, he held his outer senses undisturbed, so that from the soul's joy his face was cheerful as well. . . . When the heart rejoices the countenance is cheerful; but when it is in sorrow the countenance is sad.*

This joy and peace came from the fact that Fr Roman loved God and he loved the Church and he trusted deeply and completely that the Orthodox Church is the Body of Christ and the workshop of the Holy Spirit. He respected very much the fact that the Holy Spirit overshadowed the Episcopate and once the bishop spoke that was the end of it. It is not that he always agreed with various episcopal decisions but he would always qualify his diverging opinions with; *"Even when the bishops are wrong they are right because the Holy Spirit overshadows them and they see things that we do not see."*

He believed and confessed that the Church's spiritual and sacramental life, was whole, complete and had great power, especially when the faithful apply the spiritual medicine with a life pursuing virtue and ascetical struggle. He hated when the mystical life of the Church was reduced to superstitious attitudes toward holy things. It was reported to me once that in a homily Fr Roman said "*The Church is not a circus in which people run from one miraculous icon to the other and ignore that fact the greatest miracle of all time is on the Holy Table of every Orthodox Temple—it is the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ"* That does not at all imply that Fr Roman lacked respect and reverence for wonder working icons, relicts of saints and miraculous events but for him, the optimal miracle was when a man encounters the true and living God and then is transfigured and changed by this encounter. This encounter begins in the sacramental life of the Church and is lived out by a life of ascetical struggle. He was very distrustful of making a spectacle of

holy things separate from repentance, a life of prayer, ascetical struggle and sincere and yet understated piety.

One of the nuns told me that during the final days of Fr Roman's life a woman in the courtyard came up to him as he sat in his wheel chair and she said that she was sick and just wanted to touch him, Fr Roman drew back and in reply said *"Don't touch me, better go to church, confess, let the priest touch you with the epitrachilion – (the stole), receive Holy Communion and let Christ touch you with his Body and Blood."* He told me that it was quite a dilemma, *"Some people mistakenly think that I am a saint and don't realize that I am the one who needs prayer. The prayers of others really help me. Sometimes the pain is so great that I can barely form the words of prayer, I rely on the prayers of others"*

He told me many times
"*I tell all the priests, don't bother with the Parastas and Memorial services, only remember me at the Proskomedie and Divine Liturgy. That is where I wish to be remembered. The Divine Liturgy is the most powerful prayer; there it is that we have the best place for commemoration. The memorial services are secondary to the Bloodless Sacrifice".*

Father Roman, by example, taught us how to die and the preparation that is necessary to make that great journey from this life to the next. He was immensely grateful to God and to the nuns who took care of him until the end. One of the most important aspects of his preparation was the mystery of confession. I who had confessed to him for nearly 25 years, became his confessor in the last seven or eight years of his life. He reviewed his life with a fine-toothed comb. He was thorough, detailed, and used no euphemisms. No small detail or memory that he felt to be sinful was left out. From childhood until old age he reviewed his life and when he repeated certain things I would remind him of what he had told me a number of times, that once sins are confessed, it is not good to repeat confessing them. He said *"Yes but with the Holy Prophet David I say 'I know my sins and they are ever before me'*. He felt that it was important to do this, not because he had memory issues or that

he doubted the forgiveness of God, but because he wanted to remain with a spirit of compunction.

As many of you know, Fr Roman was a voracious reader, a bibliophile and a student of many subjects but in his final two years he deliberately limited his reading to the Psalter, the Gospels and the prayer book. I think that once in a while he might have read a theological study or two but he claimed that limiting himself to the Psalter, the Gospels and prayer books was very nourishing and while the texts were old friends there were always new insights, and a new facet of Divine Wisdom that touched his soul. Father Roman had a substantial prayer rule in addition to reading the Psalter and Gospels each day, he also prayed the Midnight Office and the Small Paraclisis each day. Concerning monasticism, he said that the most important monastery that you join and build is the one that you build in your own heart. Here he emphasized the importance of going within and meeting God in the inner recesses of the heart. Prayer, repentance, compunction and living in the presence of God is the freedom and duty of a monk. Furthermore, in a homily that he gave many years ago, he said *"you are not a monk at the moment of your tonsure, you are a monk when you do the things that belong to the monastic life. St Seraphim of Sarov spent 1000 days and nights kneeling on a rock and it was only after that the Mother of God appeared and said. 'Now Seraphim has become like one of us'* For Fr Roman who kept the monastic rule, the primary purpose of that rule is to guard and develop the inner life. I believe he also cited St Seraphim's saying that a monk who does not pray and does not make an ascetical effort is like a "charred log"—only black on the outside and raw wood within.

In the first year of Fr Roman's cancer diagnosis, at the Midnight Paschal Service he read the outdoor Gospel of St Mark and the Catechetical Homily of St John Chrysostom—in Romanian. This he read with a strong voice. The monastic community and friends thought that this would be his last Pascha. However in the second year, just two weeks before his falling asleep he was on the porch of the Church and read the Gospel of St Mark and in the Paschal Matins he read the Catechetical Homily in Romanian. Again he read with a strong voice. It was also reported that when there was some faltering in the singing of the Paschal Canon, Fr Roman took the book and began to

sing. His mind was alert to the very end of his life. Father Roman revealed the same resilience, optimism and strength that he possessed throughout his entire life. He certainly made a lasting and changing impression on the lives of a number of us and even people who have never met him are inspired by his wisdom and manner of life. May we show our gratitude to God for the gift of Fr Roman, by lives that serve and please the Lord and God that he loved and served until his very last breadth! May we have his blessing!

Through the prayers of our Holy Fathers Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on us and save us! Amen.

FATHER ROMAN AS CONFESSOR AND SPIRITUAL ELDER
A Model for Others

Reverend Mother Christophora
Holy Monastery of Transfiguration
Ellwood City, Pensylvania

Being asked to speak about Fr Roman is perhaps as intimidating as being asked to speak about the newly-departed Pope! And in this room that is filled with people who knew and loved Fr Roman, who respect him and who continue to follow his example and teaching, it is very intimidating indeed. Yet, we come together on his 10th anniversary of repose to remember him in prayer before God, to share memories, and hopefully to glean some inspiration for our own personal lives and our own spiritual struggles.

We thank Mother Abbess Gabriella and the sisterhood for welcoming us with monastic hospitality this weekend, and for their sharing this man with all of us.

When in the early 1980's I was visiting the Monastery of the Transfiguration to discern a monastic vocation, Mother Benedicta was the Acting Superior. Father Roman was serving as a parish priest, so he had not yet become our monastery chaplain. I was learning so much from Mother Benedicta, as well as from Mother Apolinaria and Mother Gabriella. My own discernment to join the monastery in Ellwood City was really swayed by the many years of monastic experience that Mother Benedicta had and all that she had to offer. I told myself that I would not have an opportunity to learn from a monastic eldress with so much experience anywhere else within our American Orthodoxy. Adding Fr Roman to that group of monastic elders, which also included our foundress Mother Abbess Alexandra, was really the "frosting on the cake."

As chaplain he served as our confessor, our teacher, homilist, and presided over the daily services. He also met with ev-

eryone who came to our door, talking with each person, on their level and in a way that would be helpful, encouraging and edifying. If a scientist came, he talked about science. If a Roman Catholic monk came asking about the Jesus Prayer, he spoke to them from practical experience. And if a group of ladies from a parish came, he explained the life in Christ as they could live it, within their daily lives and family experience.

My greatest personal blessing was the obedience I had to drive Fr Roman to his many speaking engagements. Whether he spoke at a diocesan retreat, gave a homily at a parish, or offered a banquet speech, he always touched the people in such loving, practical and encouraging ways. He offered direct application of deep Orthodox spiritually to people in ways that were real and attainable. He impressed their hearts and souls. The audience always left uplifted, inspired and encouraged. This was, I believe, his greatest contribution to our intellectual, materialistic society, and to our, sometimes, rigid Orthodox world.

The wonderful books and interviews that have been published by Dormition Monastery and others continue to feed pilgrims, inquirers, young families and aging parishioners with his encouragement and practical application of Orthodox spirituality. We thank Mother Gabriella and this community for making these publications available. Such publications require long and tedious labors and are truly labors of love.

I think what I glean here is that our spiritual lives can be deep, but are mostly hidden, perhaps even to ourselves. During our lifetime many of us undergo a rather private, personal struggle and growth. Think of the years Fr Roman was subjected torture and prison. Recall his being denied human dignity and even ordination to the priesthood due to the fear people—including church leaders—had of the Communist government. He didn't talk much about those years in prison, the harsh labor and solitary confinement, except to tell us that those were his years of spiritual awakening and growth. Most of us will never undergo such torture and deprivation, thank God, yet each of us has our own spiritual struggles, our passions to overcome, our weaknesses and our difficulties. Although we live in a "free society" yet so many people even in our time suffer various types of abuse, as well as poverty, anger, illness, neglect etc. Can we

also grow through our difficulties and sufferings? If we give thanks to God and cooperate with our Lord, we can witness to Christ and become an example to others.

During the past forty days several persons that have been known to our monastery in Ellwood City have passed to eternal life. I would like to mention here three of them and to share a spiritual tidbit that came from each of them.

One was an abbot and spiritual elder, who was tonsured to the Great Schema just eight days before his repose on Bright Wednesday. The second was the wife of a priest who "held court" with countless priests, seminarians, theologians, spiritual daughters and day care children. She fell asleep in the Lord the fourth Saturday of Lent. And the third person was a 91 year-old man, who faced many challenges in life, a convert to Orthodoxy, and former Episcopal priest, son of an Episcopal priest, a prison minister, a well as a father of five children. He died on Holy Saturday a few hours before midnight.

When Schma-Archimandrite Panteleimon was buried on Bright Saturday, his spiritual children gathered from near and far to join the Brotherhood of Holy Cross Monastery to give him a dignified and awesome funeral. As his successor and spiritual son noted in a brief eulogy entitled, "The Mystery of Christian Love," In these final days of Fr Panteleimon's (earlier known as Fr Seraphim) earthly pilgrimage — even as the cancer was draining the very life out of him — he held fast to this obedience, and to the mystery of Christian love. When the doctors told him that he was dying of an incurable brain tumor, he immediately said that he did not care at all about trying to find a way to live for even one day longer — he only wanted to remain as mentally alert as possible during the time that he had left, so that he could spend it ministering to others. These were not merely pious words: we all watched, day in and day out, as Fr Panteleimon spent hour after hour pouring himself out, spending every ounce of strength left in him and more, striving to his final breath to impart every last word of his spiritual testament to all the many people who came to him — everyone alike, monks, and laypeople, and even the hospice nurse when she called for a simple medical consult. His love for Christ, for His Mother and His saints became so overwhelming and overpowering that he no longer had any desires left except to share that love with absolutely

everyone around him.

When we hosted the funeral and burial of Matushka Sophie Daniels at our monastery on the fifth Thursday of Lent, our chapel was filled to capacity with folks unknown to us. They were obviously very tied to Matushka Sophia spiritually and gathered at her funeral with deep gratitude for her life and her influence on them. Her family wrote this in her obituary: *"Her generosity was endless. She insisted on negotiating "backwards" with contractors and handymen, all of which left her house with fresh baked bread, French baguettes to be specific. Plumbers argued over who would get to respond to her service calls. She was constantly cooking and baking, seeing that as part of her ministry to nurture and love all who visited her. She went to great lengths to ensure her meals were perfectly prepared, presented, and enjoyed. She routinely listened to others as they shared their challenges, endeavoring to meet them where they were and to renew their faith. Her faith was fierce, and she passionately shared her unwavering belief that what the Bible says is true, and that such truth proves itself experientially in our lives. She often said that our faith can be strengthened by holding something physical. To that end she frequently gave little icons of Jesus and his Mother to those to whom she thought would benefit from the gift. These included bank tellers, checkout clerks, hospital doctors, nurses, staff. We estimate more than 1,000 icons have been distributed."*

And on Bright Thursday we were once again overwhelmed at our monastery with the number of people who attended John Dowker's funeral and burial. They came because John touched their lives in ways known only to them and to God. As one great-nephew (through marriage) wrote: "I just wanted to say a few words to honor my uncle John. As someone who grew up without a father around for the most part, John had a huge impact on my life in a positive way. We didn't spend as much time together as I wish we could have, but each time we were together it was an extremely meaningful experience. As you guys may know, he was a huge hockey fan and he made that evident to me at a young age. When I took an interest in playing and watching hockey, he came into my life at the best time possible. He took me to my first penguin game in 2010, and ever since I spent some time with him on that day he was always

someone I looked up to. The penguins won the game 6-2 and it was something I'll remember fondly for the rest of my life. That doesn't even scratch the surface of some of the great advice and guidance he gave to me as a teenager and young man. Everytime he visited for the holidays, I feel like I talked to him more than anyone else out of a house full of family and friends. Not to mention the friendly and frequent supportive text messages when I was going through some tough times in life. To call john a great man is an understatement. He is a man of God, and he will be deeply missed. May he rest in peace."

I have shared with you something about three recently departed souls. These people were serving the Lord in their lives. Quite frankly they were ordinary people, like the person sitting next to you right now. As we learned from Fr Roman's example and preaching, God is with us, talk to Him, invite Him into every activity, every conversation, every interaction with others. And each of us will grow into a person of God, with unique gifts and unique ways of sharing the love of God. Being in the presence of Fr Roman, Fr Panteleimon, Matushka Sophia, and John was a comforting and nurturing experience. Each of them loved others for who they were, and in this way brought out the best in others. May it be so for each of us. Let each of us keep the faith, endure the struggle with hope, and love one another as Jesus loves us!

Christ is Risen!

REFLECTIONS AT FATHER ROMAN'S 10TH ANNIVERSARY MEMORIAL

Fr. John Konkle
Dormition Orthodox Monastery

When you see me, know this: the end is near. Probably not as near as you wish, but it's still near.

Your Beatitude, your Eminences, your Grace, Reverend Fathers and Mothers. Christ is risen!

In the Fall of 2010–I had been at Dormition Monastery for about a year and a half—I received an email from a former student of mine. (In an earlier chapter of my life. I had been a philosophy professor at a college out east.) I hadn't heard from her in several years, and it had been many years since she had been my student. The email was very brief: *"Professor Konkle, I'm overcome with doubts; I've lost my faith. Why do you believe in God?"* Signed, so and so.

Even though it had been many years since I had been teaching, I thought I knew the answer to her question; we had had several such conversations before. But kind of like Balaam's ass stopped on the road by an angel, my fingers wouldn't move over the keyboard. I couldn't type the obvious answers to this question. The day went by; another day went by. I didn't understand what the problem was. And then gradually it became clear to me that I was willing to offer her good reasons to believe in God, but she had requested me for my reasons. "Why do you believe in God?" she had asked. This became—well, not an existential crisis for me, but a kind of existential encounter with myself and God. So I found myself drawn into a deeper stage of prayer, asking God, "Why do I believe in you? I know the textbook answers, and I know good reasons. Why do I believe in you?"

After about a week, I wrote her back a very brief email: "I don't expect you to understand this, but for the last year and a

half, I've lived with a man, we call him 'Father Roman,' and in him, I see the gospel. I want the life that he has." I never heard back from her, and I knew when I wrote the email that it was probably not the word she wanted to hear; after all, she wasn't the one seeing Fr Roman—I was. But I realized that at that moment, it's why I believed in God.

And that is still true to this day. I want the life that he has. The gospel that I saw in his life has been described by various people that you've heard from here. Examples are obvious, and the words really don't do them justice, and certainly my words don't do them justice—the way in which he loved his enemies and prayed for his persecutors. You can read that in the lives of the saints and in the martyrs; we've all read it many different times, about many different people; and now you can read it about Fr Roman. But this was different. I saw him love these people; I saw him pray for these people. I wasn't reading about him. I witnessed it.

One Saturday after I had completed Proskomede—Proskomede is the service of preparation for Divine Liturgy when we remember the names of people that are submitted by faithful—Fr Roman came up to me, and said, "While you're doing Prosomede, I remember all of the people that God has used in my life, thanking God for them." And he started naming people: his parents and his siblings and his teachers—some by name, and some by category—the monks at the different monasteries that he was connected with. He was proceeding chronologically through his life, and then he started naming the guards and the people who persecuted him in prison, the people who tortured him. He said these names with unmistakable joy, thanking God for what any of us would call enemies. His love for them was so deep, so genuine, so profound. (In this respect, Fr Roman is a confessor of the faith; whatever the Church ever decides about him, it doesn't matter. He's a confessor of the faith; that's the terminology the Church provides for people who have manifested the faith through suffering as Fr Roman has.) So this is one way that I saw, and that many of you saw, in Fr Roman—the gospel in flesh,

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. That, of course,

is a reference to the Son of God. But we are to become sons of God. We are to be deified. Christ is supposed to take up residency in us to such a degree that when people see us, they see Christ. In this way, the Word becomes flesh in us. This is the gospel in us, and this is what I saw in Fr Roman. We all saw this in him in many different ways, but the way that I would like to develop a little bit more is by reference to an Old Testament prophecy of the coming Messiah. Some of you who frequent Dormition Monastery will know that I have a favorite prophecy. It's Isaiah chapter 50 verse 4 and following. We read it on Thursday and Friday of Holy Week. That prophecy says that the Messiah will have two characteristics: a tongue and an ear. The Messiah will have a tongue so that he can sustain the weary with a word. He will have an ear because the Lord will awaken him morning by morning to speak to him. The text goes on to describe the Messiah's obedience to that morning by morning word—even to the point of his own torture and crucifixion. These two characteristics are true of Christ, and they're expressed in the Gospels in many ways. Jesus would go out to a deserted place in the mornings before dawn and pray to his Father in secret. He would go into the prayer closet, shut the door, and pray to his Father, just like he invited us to do. And then he would go out among the people and sustain the weary with a word. That was Jesus's ministry: listening to his Father, and sustaining the weary with a word.

In the Gospel of John this relationship between Jesus and his Father is repeatedly made clear: The words I say to you, I don't speak on my own initiative; whatever the Father tells me, I say to you; and similarly, the things that I do, I don't do on my own initiative; whatever the Father tells me to do, I do. The Son of God lived his life in this intimate communion with his Father, so that he was really a conduit of the Source of life that flows through him into the world around him. I say all that because that's how I experienced Fr Roman. He had the ear and the tongue of a disciple. The Lord awakened him morning by morning. He prayed. He communed with his Father. And, in his prayer, he was given a word to sustain the weary with a word. The examples are endless. I have heard a few new stories this weekend. Many of you here, and countless others who are not here, have experienced being sustained by a word from Fr Ro-

man which he had received from the Holy Spirit.

I thought for a long time that Fr Roman was clairvoyant because he was always telling me things that I was thinking about. Lots of people had that experience with him. The first time we (my wife and I) met him, he described our whole life, and then he described what our life would be like here, at Dormition Monastery, even though at that time I was a deacon, and I was only visiting the Monastery for a week. Many people have had those sorts of experiences with him; I'll give a couple examples in a moment, but I came to believe that Fr Roman didn't know what I was thinking; he simply was in constant communion with the Holy Spirit—literally praying continuously. And, at certain appropriate moments, he simply spoke aloud the conversation he was having with the Holy Spirit; it just became audible at a certain moment. And the Holy Spirit knew what I needed to hear, or what you needed to hear. The difference between this constant communion with the Holy Spirit and a type of clairvoyance is important. My original stereotype was that Fr Roman sees what's going on inside of me, and he's such a clever person and such a student of human nature that he knows what I need. This would be all about him—how talented he is. But that's not what I experienced from him at all. He was just living his life, communing with his God, and saying a word from the Holy Spirit. And it was okay if the word fell on deaf ears; he didn't force or push his thoughts on us. He was planting seeds, letting them sprout in God's time.

Our Lord has an intense dialogue in the Gospel of John in chapter 7 or 8. There he says, "One who speaks from himself seeks his own glory." It's really quite a stunning phrase: we speak our own words to draw attention to ourselves. But, Jesus continues, the one who seeks the glory of God is true, genuine, righteous. So we can say that Fr Romans sought the glory of God for he said the words that God gave him to say. This is my understanding of the many, many different accounts of what looked like clairvoyance from the outside, but really are what St Paul meant when he exhorted us to pray without ceasing, and what our Lord meant when he instructed us to pray at all times and don't lose heart. And so this offering of himself to us by sustaining us who are weary with a word, with the Word, is re-

ally the way in which he human(ly?) manifested Christ to us because Christ says, Come to me, all you are weary and weighed down, and I will give you rest.

Isn't this what Fr Roman did for us? We went to him to receive this sustaining word, and he was never too busy for us. It is common for people to come to me and say, "Oh, I know you're so busy, I know this isn't a good time," and so forth. I never went to Fr Roman and said that. It wouldn't even have occurred to me to say those words to Fr Roman because he was always present and receptive. I have boundaries that communicate, "I'm busy. Keep your distance." But who would ever say to Fr Roman, "Oh, you must be too busy"? He was always there and available, and genuinely delighted to see you and embrace you and cherish you. I think that I was special to Fr Roman, and all of you think you were special to Fr Roman—because we all were. And it's because when Fr Roman was with you, he was 100% with you. Not 99.5% with you. His mind didn't wander.

Actually, his mind wandered once in my awareness, in my experience. I was with him for six years. I saw his mind wander once. I was serving Divine Liturgy, and he was off to my left, not serving—he usually wouldn't serve unless it was a Sunday or feast day. And you know, most of you know, I make a large number of mistakes—made and still make a large number of mistakes—but he was always my safety net. On this occasion, I was saying the augmented litany, and I lost my spot. I don't know what happened, but I couldn't figure out where I was. Fr Roman immediately stood up from his chair and came over to the altar, nearly in tears, and said with palpable sorrow in his voice, "Father, forgive me, I wasn't being attentive." Now, if I had said those words to someone it would have been total sarcasm, but he really meant it. In the many times that I had lost my place before, he would immediately and seamlessly say the words I was forgetting and in this way draw me back to the service. He could do this because he was saying the liturgy to himself internally. But there's just this one time when he was thinking about something else. He couldn't save me from my distraction at that moment, and it broke his heart. It broke his heart that he wasn't there for me and at my moment of inattentiveness. When we were in his presence, he was totally there for us. He cherished us. He honored us.

And he also cherished birds and snowflakes and everything, all creation. He came to the evening service one time and said, "Can you hear the sound of that snow falling?" I was stunned by his words, and said to myself, "No, I can't hear the sound of the snow falling; I am too deaf." One Sunday morning he came to church and told me, "The birds are all Greek." When I looked at him in dumbfounded silence, he continued, "They're singing, "Kyriake! Kyriake!" (The day of the Lord! The day of the Lord!). His attentiveness to the world around him wasn't a mere awareness of physical details, but to the spiritual nature of things.

Here is another story about Fr Roman having a word for someone. One Saturday morning, a fellow came up to me after lunch—I had never met him before, and I don't think I've ever seen him since. He said, "Father Roman changed my life." I like those kinds of stories, so I said, "Well, tell me about it, tell me how." He continued, "It was about 10 years ago. Last time, the only other time, I visited this monastery; it was on a Saturday. After lunch, Fr Roman came up to me, he didn't introduce himself to me, he simply walked up and said, 'I don't know why people listen to music that makes them want to break things.' And then he walked away." Then the young man said, "I was that person." He had been raised in the church, and was probably in his mid 20s at that time when Fr Roman spoke with him. Father Roman's words pierced his heart. He went home and got rid of all of his music that he had been listening to, that made him want to break things, that riled him up inside. He took chanting lessons and eventually became the cantor at his parish, and eventually started giving lessons to others. A simple and unexpected word from Fr Roman totally revolutionized his life.

Another story along those lines that is quite charming and that also connects with Archbishop Daniel's talk about Orthodoxy in America. I was on Holy Mount Athos, shortly after Fr Roman died. I was walking down a road toward a skete, and a monk stopped to pick me up and give me a ride. I got in the car, and he said, "Where are you from?" I replied, "From the United States." "What state?" "Michigan." "O, Michigan," he said, "I've been to Michigan." Turns out that he was a Romanian born man who came to the US, to Chicago, in his early adulthood and worked construction. When I told him that I served

at Holy Dormition Monastery, he was noticeably surprised. He asked if Fr Roman was still there, and if I knew him. I told him that I knew Fr Roman well, but that he had recently reposed. I asked him if he had known Fr Roman, and he told me a story. This young man, who had been baptized in the Church but really had no particular interest in his faith, was a part of the Romanian community in Chicago, but not following a spiritual life at all. He had heard about Fr Roman, and had heard that Fr Roman was telling people that Dormition Monastery is a monastery for Americans—"It's an American monastery"—and this really upset him a great deal. He didn't really much care about the Church, but he did care that the monastery should be a Romanian monastery for Romanians—and he was quite animated about this. One of his friends came to him one day and said, "I'm going to go visit Fr Roman at Dormition Monastery; do you want to come with me?" He said, "yes, I want to come. I have some things I want to tell him." And so he came to our Monastery and went to talk with Fr Roman, but before he could say anything, Fr Roman told him everything that he was going to say. His heart melted, and Fr Roman said, "You need to become a monk. Go find a monastery. Go find a spiritual father and become a monk." He went to Mount Athos, and he became a monk.

I could go on for a long time with these stories, but I won't. One more. I'll end with the final word that Fr Roman gave me. I will not interpret this word for you because I think that when God gives a word to a person, like with the sayings of the desert fathers, the interpretation is unique to the situation, to the person it is given. But others may benefit from hearing the word, and God can use it in a way unique to their situations—as he does with the sayings of the desert fathers. So Fr Roman was dying, and Mother Gabriella had asked me to go to Mount Athos. I thought this was kind of crazy; why would I go to Mount Athos when Fr Roman was dying? I went. But a few days before I departed, and before Fr Roman reposed, this happened. I hadn't seen Fr Roman much since he had been in the cloister, being taken care of by the nuns and Dr Henshaw and others. After the Thursday Vespers one of the nuns came to me and said, "Fr Roman wants to speak with you." My eyes really lit up because I was used to being pretty close to him in the altar. I didn't have many conversations with him outside of

the altar, but I was definitely missing him, and so I was very happy Fr Roman wanted to speak with me. He was pretty weak at that time, and I went to his bedside in the cloister. He looked up at me and said, “Don’t take a suitcase. Take a backpack.” Fr Roman’s final word to me: Take a backpack.

Christ has risen!

38th ANNUAL PILGRIMAGE CELEBRATION 2025

Guest of Honor
His Eminence Archbishop JOHN (Abdalah)
Antiochian Archdiocese

PILGRIMAGE SCHEDULE

Thursday August 14
6:00 pm Vigil of the Feast with Lamentations

Friday August 15
9:00 am Akathist, Hours and Vesting of Hierarchs
10:00 am Hierarchal Divine Liturgy
2:30 pm Holy Unction Service
5:30 pm Vespers

We ask that guests bring their own lunch.
The monastery will provide refreshments, coffee and sweets.