

THE BURNING BUSH

Monastic Journal



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consult our web page at: www.dormitionmonastery.org**

A FEW RECOLLECTIONS OF FATHER ROMAN

Archpriest Michael Butler

Early in 1992, my family and I were still living in Dallas, Texas. I was serving as a Deacon at St. Seraphim Cathedral under the ever-memorable Archbishop Dimitri. My wife and I had agreed that after Pascha we would move to Michigan. When I spoke to Vladyka about this, he said to me, “Oh, if you’re going to Michigan, you have to meet Fr. Roman.” At this time, I had never heard of Fr. Roman, and I told Vladyka so. He told me that everybody knew Fr. Roman, and that I should be sure to look him up when I arrived.

So it came to pass that my family and I moved to Michigan in May 1992, almost exactly 24 years ago today. At first, we established ourselves in my in-laws attic, in their farmhouse near Westphalia, and I found out, to my great delight, that Holy Dormition Monastery was not that far away. I don’t think I had been in Michigan more than two days when I called the monastery and asked to speak to Fr. Roman. I told him who I was, and that Archbishop Dimitri had told me I should meet him. He said to me, sure, I could come to visit, and he explained to me that the Berry Road exit was on Hwy 127, just after a sign warning me not to pick up hitchhikers. (This was in the days before GPS, so landmarks like this were important.)

It was also in the days when the monastery consisted of the old white farmhouse, the pole barn chapel with the kitchen and dining room attached, and the little white guesthouse out back. I remember turning into the driveway of the monastery the first time: there was a nun hacking weeds out by the road. She was working vigorously and her habit was drenched in sweat. But as I turned in, she lifted up a bright, happy face and waved to me. From a distance, I thought she was quite young, given how hard she was working. I found out later that it was Mother Apollinaria, whom I believe can still outwork anybody else in the monastery.

Father Roman met me in the sitting room of the little guesthouse. It was scarcely more than an entryway in those days, but there was a little couch and a chair, so we sat and talked. I don’t remember much about our first conversation. We just made small talk. I remember there was a lot of awkward silence, since neither of us had much to say to the other, but he told me that the monastery served Liturgy on Wednesdays, as well as on weekends, and that I was welcome to come and serve with him if I wanted. I knew then and there that I would. In fact, the very next Wednesday I showed up to serve, and I continue to serve at the Wednesday morning liturgy almost every week for the next eight years, first as a Deacon and later as a Priest.

Sure, I served Saturday night Vigils and Sunday Liturgies and many feast days with Fr. Roman, but the quiet Wednesday morning Liturgies in the little pole barn chapel are the ones that are dearest to my heart. Alas, I don't have time to share all of my memories from those days: Mother Benedicta praying in the corner of the altar, the arrival of the young sisters from Romania, the other faithful visitors whom I came to know and love, conversations over breakfast after the Liturgy. I remember one conversation at breakfast that went on for several weeks: someone had donated to the monastery some smoked plum preserves. I might have been the only one who liked them, because they turned up on the table every time I was there, and like the miraculous cruse of oil in the Elijah story, the quantity of smoked plums never seemed to diminish. Nobody else seemed to take the smoked plums seriously, and I couldn't believe that they were not, in fact, some kind of Romanian delicacy. Fr. Roman tried to assure me that they were nothing more than "a mistake." It may be the only thing he ever told me that I did not believe. I confess I still think about smoked plums when I think about the monastery, and I've never had them since.

After serving as a Deacon for a couple of years at the monastery, at St. Andrew Church in East Lansing, and at St. John Chrysostom Church in Grand Rapids, St. Demetrius Church in Jackson had lost their pastor, and asked if I would come and perform Deacon's services for them I served as a Deacon and took care of the church in Jackson for about a year and a half, until my ordination as a Priest in April 1995, when I became the pastor there. Fr. Roman was one of the Priests at my ordination. He is the one who received me through the Royal Doors and who led me around the altar for the first time. He had said to me beforehand: "Fr. Michael, when the Bishop lays his hands on your head at your ordination, pray for what is most important to you, because God will hear your prayer at that time." There is only one thing I prayed for when Archbishop Job laid his hands on my head, and I confess to you today that God indeed heard my prayer. I cannot tell you what it is that I prayed for, because it is a personal thing, but if there is a man here today who is facing ordination, I encourage you to take Fr. Roman's words to heart: when the Bishop lays his hands on your head, pray for what is most important, because God will indeed hear your prayer at that time.

Because I was ordained a little later in life, when I was 33 years old, and because I was ordained through the OCA's late vocations program, I was assigned a mentor for the first three years of my priesthood. The Holy Synod of Bishops assigned Fr. Roman as my mentor. Oh, how I wore him out with questions. In the beginning, I don't think I could blow my nose without checking with Fr. Roman how a Priest is supposed to do that. But he was patient with me, like he was with everybody, and in time I learned

how to serve and to pastor my flock and I didn't burden him so often with questions. I remember right after my ordination, Fr. Roman offered to let me serve at the monastery every day for 40 days so that I could learn how to serve properly. Alas, work and family obligations didn't let me do that, but instead of serving alongside Fr. Roman on Wednesday mornings as I had as a Deacon, he insisted that I serve the Liturgy myself. Since he was my mentor, he would serve with me and make sure that I knew what I was doing. So, the first Wednesday morning that I served as a Priest at the Monastery, Fr. Roman vested fully and served as a second Priest, standing to the right of the altar. The next Wednesday morning, he put on his stole and stood in the altar and watched what I did. The Wednesday morning after that, he said to me, "Fr. Michael, you know what you're doing. I'm going to go and sing with the sisters." And out he went and left me alone in the altar to serve. That is how Fr. Roman mentored me.

As you all know, Fr Roman was usually upbeat and joyful. Thank God, his joy was contagious, and I always felt better for being with him. One time, I was staying with him in the St Nicholas house and we were walking up to the church for a service. I must have been complaining about something, because he stopped at the corner of the new guest house and said to me, "Hieromonk Daniel used to say that priests should always be joyful, because not even the angels in heaven share our dignity."

He also told me, more than once, that I should never lose my sense of humor. He could always laugh at himself. One morning at breakfast after a Liturgy he said, "Fr Michael, there are two things which are a scandal: a fat Priest and a skinny pig," and he patted his stomach and laughed.

I do miss his laugh...

I only heard him speak harshly one time. He was preaching at Liturgy on a Saturday morning and he was upset with people who would not close their mouths on the spoon when they received Holy Communion. He rebuked them for lack of faith: did they really believe they would get sick from the Body and Blood of Christ, which is the Fountain of Immortality and the Medicine of Incorruption? If Holy Communion never, in fact, touches your lips, how can the Priest say, "Lo, this has touched your lips. It will take away your iniquity and cleanse you of your sins"?

Once, I asked Fr. Roman how I could be a better Spiritual Father for my people. People come to the Spiritual Father because they are burdened or feel guilty, so it is important to let them talk and for me to listen. Give them consolation and simple answers, but beware of those who just want comfort. And be sure to pray for the people, as well. There cannot always be comfort in life. Suffering and pain are necessary for salvation. When people can thank God for their suffering, then they have salvation. He himself came to thank God for his time in prison.

I liked to hear his stories about his days in Romania. He would talk about his childhood in Moldavia, his time at university, when he served as a priest in the Carpathian region. When he was a Deacon, he was assigned to guard the relics of St. Paraskeva in the cathedral in Iași. He said he witnessed many miracles that St. Paraskeva worked for people, “but our faith is not founded on miracles; it is founded on Christ,” he would say.

He rarely mentioned the time he was in prison in Pitești, but he would tell stories about his time digging the Black Sea canal. He remembered fondly the Catholic clergy that were imprisoned with him. “Fr. Michael,” he would tell me, “we reunited the Church every day while we were in prison.” There was a Catholic Priest to whom he taught the Akathist Hymn. Someone smuggled in a Bible that was carefully taken apart, and the books of the Bible were given out to different prisoners for them to memorize, so that they could have comfort from the Scriptures and recite them for others. Fr. Roman was given the Gospel of St. John. He regretted that he could no longer recite it from memory as he could when he was in prison. Later, he would tell me, “Pray for those who are your enemies. In the end, you will love them. It’s what happened to me.”

When I heard about his final illness, like everyone else, I was torn between wanting to rush to the Monastery to spend some time with him and respecting his need to rest and care for his health. I would see him from time to time when I was able to get to the Monastery, if he was feeling well. He and I would exchange a brief word, I would ask his blessing. If I was serving in the altar, I waited anxiously to hear him cough; then I knew that he was feeling well enough to be brought to church. If it was Liturgy, I would go out to exchange the kiss of peace with him.

It was only a few months before he passed that I was able to sit down with him for the last time. I remember that it was a cold day. One of the sisters wheeled him into the old chapel, where we had served together so often, and left us alone to talk. Fr. Roman was all bundled up to keep warm. He told me a few stories, mostly about himself, but I found that, as I listened, everything he said about himself really applied to me. It was so very subtle and humble what he did: he taught me without teaching me.

Near the end of our conversation, however, he began to tell me about a few regrets that he had. And I understood what he was saying. When he finished talking, I went into the sacristy, where he had heard my Confession so many times, got the stole and the hand Cross he had used with me, and came back to him. He took off his skoufia, I laid the stole over his head, and I said the prayer of absolution over him. In the 23 years that I knew him, he had always said that prayer for me; only at the end was I able to return the favor.

I cried openly when I learned that he had died.

I had told my congregation in Livonia that, when Fr. Roman died, it would not matter what the day or the season was, or what was on the calendar, I was going to his funeral. I remember looking at him in the coffin and thinking how small he looked. Then it struck me that it was right: Fr. Roman was all used up, there was nothing left; he had given everything he had, everything he was, to Christ and to His people.

But I will tell you the part that meant the most to me. God bless Archbishop Nathaniel for it. Near the end of the funeral service, he asked me if I would help to carry Fr. Roman around the church. I told him it would be a blessing for me to carry for a little while the man who carried me for so long. And so I did. People asked me if it was heavy to carry Fr. Roman, but I lied and said, no, he wasn't heavy, he was my Father.

I always try to visit his grave when I stop by the Monastery. It is a strange thing, but I often burst into tears when I get near his grave. The only other time this has happened to me was when I visited the grave of Elder Sophrony (Sakharov) at the Monastery of St. John the Baptist in Essex, England. At any rate, I exchange a few words with Mother Benedicta, then I sit down with Fr. Roman and we have a conversation. I am always comforted when I leave.

I will confess one other thing before I finish: I am convinced that, a couple of times in the last year, Fr. Roman has concelebrated the Liturgy with me at my church in Livonia. He stands at the right side of the altar in gold vestments and reads the Priest's prayers in a low voice. You can make of that what you will; I know what I think about it.

I don't know how to finish these recollections of Fr. Roman or how to bring my words to a proper conclusion. Maybe it's because I myself am not finished with Fr. Roman. I don't think I ever will be. I never had a Spiritual Father like him; maybe I never will again. He received me kindly as a stranger and took me in; he guided me by his word and his example; he was my Father, my mentor and ultimately my friend. I believe he saved my soul. Certainly, I am the Priest I am today because of him, and for that I will always be grateful. Maybe the best way to end is not to say anything more to you, but to say something to Fr. Roman himself, and so I say to him,

Fr. Roman, if you have found boldness before God, never stop praying for us, the children whom you have left behind. As we keep your memory, so also keep ours. May God give you an honorable place in His Kingdom. And pray for us all, so that, when our day comes, we may all join you at Christ's right hand so that you can say with joy: "Behold, here am I and the children whom God has given me" (Is 8.18).

May we be worthy of his prayers. ■

THE LIFE OF MARY MAGDALENE

Mary Magdalene, the legend goes, was born of noble parents, the descendants of kings. With her sister Martha and brother Lazarus she possessed Magdalo, Bethany, and a great part of the city of Jerusalem. But, succumbing to the temptations of riches, beauty and youth, she forsook her heritage and became a common sinner until at length, inspired by the Holy Spirit, she came to the house of Simon the Leper, the Pharisee of Bethany, where Christ was dining, and having bathed His feet with her penitential tears, dried them with her hair, and anointed them with precious ointment, she received Christ's absolution, despite the murmurings of the Pharisee. Christ delivered her from seven sins, and made her His particular friend and servant, for she provided for the material needs of Christ and His disciples on their journeys. He defended her against her sister's complaints and raised her brother Lazarus from the dead for her sake. Mary again anointed Christ soon before His passion, and stood near the Cross and brought ointment to the tomb on Pascha morning. She was one of the first to whom the Risen Christ appeared, and she received from Him the commission to announce His Resurrection to the Apostles. For this she is the designated apostle to the apostles, and is called "equal to the Apostles."

Fourteen years after Christ's Ascension, during a great persecution in Jerusalem, Mary Magdalene, Martha and Lazarus, Saint Maximin, and other Christians were put to sea in a rudderless boat by the unbelievers. By the providence of God they arrived safely in Marseille, where they sheltered under the portico of a pagan temple. Seeing the people bringing sacrifices to the idols Mary Magdalene preached the Gospel to them and converted them. Shortly afterwards, she also converted the prince of the region and his wife by obtaining the favor of the conception of a son and heir for them, but not without first having to appear three times to them in a vision, threatening them with punishment for their sumptuous living and neglect of God's poor. The prince, wishing to test Mary's doctrine, resolved to travel to Rome to see Saint Peter. Against his wishes his pregnant wife decided to accompany him. The couple left their possessions in the care of Mary Magdalene, and having received her blessing, set to ship.

Soon there arose a terrible storm, during which the wife was delivered of a son and died. The sailors superstitiously wanted to cast her body overboard, but the prince prevailed on them to abandon the body and the living infant on a forsaken rock in the sea. Commending his dear ones to Mary Magdalene and to God, the prince completed his journey unto Rome, was received by Peter and undertook with him a pilgrimage to the Holy

Land. Confirmed in his faith and having completed his pilgrimage, the prince set out on the return voyage to Marseille.

Along the way, the ship happened by the rock where the wife and the child had been left, so the prince had the sailors stop there. They found the child still alive. More marvelously, as the prince offered thanksgivings to Mary Magdalene, the body of his wife also came to life. The wife declared that while the prince had been visiting the Holy Land with Saint Peter, she had also been there with Mary Magdalene who had preserved the lives of herself and the child. Rejoicing, the family completed the voyage to Marseille, where they found Mary Magdalene preaching to her disciples. After receiving baptism the noble couple assisted in the conversion of the land.

Meanwhile, Mary Magdalene, desirous of sovereign contemplation, sought out a desert place and remained there in solitude for thirty years. Each day, at each canonical hour, she was lifted up into the heavenly choirs and fed on celestial food. One day a priest, who had also found solitude nearby, saw her elevation, and wondering at the occurrence, approached. The holiness of the place hindered his movement, but at last he spoke with the saint, who told him her story and commanded him to go to Saint Maximin, her spiritual adviser in her earlier days and tell him that she would appear amid angels in his oratory on the day after Easter. The priest did as he was told, and all happened as Mary Magdalene had said. She appeared to Maximin, spoke with him, received communion from him and then died. Maximin buried her honorably. ■

Excerpt from "The Life of Saint Mary Magdalene and of her Sister Saint Martha, A Medieval Biography Translated and Annotated by David Mycoff." Cistercian Publications, Kalamazoo, MI, 1989, pp. 3-5.

The skull of St. Mary Magdalene can be found in the South of France in once Gallo Roman town of Villa Latta that after the death of St. Maximin (one of the 70 disciples of Christ) became St. Maximin-la-Sainte-Baume. The skull rests most of the year in the crypt of the Basilique Ste. Marie Madeleine, a massive Gothic basilica constructed in the 13th century under Charles II of Anjou, King of Naples and nephew of King Louis of France. It was on this ground that the body of Mary Magdalene was buried by Maximin (1st bishop of Aix). Her remains were found intact except for her jaw bone. In the dust in the tomb was found also a small wooden tablet with the inscription in Latin: "here lies the body of Mary Magdalene." Also found in the tomb was a small vial containing earth soaked with blood believed to be the blood of Jesus she collected at the foot of the Cross.

Her jaw bone was venerated in France for centuries until 1295 when it was reunited with her skull. It was recorded that when the tomb was opened a wonderful smell of perfume filled the air and there was a small piece of skin attached to her skull in the spot where Jesus touched her after the Resurrection, that was preserved

through the miracle of Jesus' touch. The piece of skin was placed in a glass vial and it is now part of the reliquary, along with the vial of dirt, below the skull.

Once a year, on the Feast of St. Mary Magdalene, on July 22nd the 880 pounds gold reliquary is taken out and carried by 8 men throughout the town in a candlelight procession with hymns and prayers. The people can venerate her relics and take part in the one week long Feast. When taken outdoors, the skull is covered with a gold "face" for protection.

Mary Magdalene is commemorated on July 22. ■

THE BRÂNCOVEANU FAMILY MARTYRDOM

We commemorate on August 15 the falling asleep of the Theotokos. This day also marks the martyrdom of the Romanian printz and ruler, Constantin Brâncoveanu, along with his four sons, and his counselor Ianache Văcărescu, that were beheaded on this day.

Constantin Brâncoveanu was born in 1654 in Wallachia, and ascended to the throne in 1688. On August 15, 1714 on the day of his 60th birthday, he is brought, together with his four sons, Constantin II (31 years old), Stefan (29 years old), Radu (24 years old), and Matei (16 (?)years old), as well as his counselor Ianache Văcărescu, before the Turkish Sultan Ahmed III. He is stripped of all his possessions and is asked to renounce his Orthodox Christian faith in exchange for his life and the life of his sons. At this moment, history reports him as saying: “Behold all my fortunes and all I had, I have lost. Let us not lose our souls. Be brave and manly, my beloved. Ignore death; look at Christ, our Savior, how much has endured for us and with what shameful death has died. Strongly believe in this and do not move, nor leave your faith for this life and this world.” It followed that his sons and his counselor Ianache Văcărescu were beheaded in front of him and he also was beheaded after them.

Legend has it that his youngest son, Matei (some accounts say he was only 11 or 12, others say he was 16) was scared after seeing the execution of his older brothers, and crying asked his father to let him renounce the Orthodox faith and convert to Islam. His father, however, said: “From our kind nobody lost his faith. It is better to die a thousand times than to leave your ancient faith just to live a few more years on earth.” Matei listened to his father and submitted to the execution.

Constantin Brâncoveanu was a great patron of culture. Many books were printed under his reign in many languages: Greek, Romanian, Bulgarian, Arabic, Turkish. He is also the founder of the Royal Academy of Bucharest (in 1694).

In his religious and laic constructions he harmoniously combined in architecture the mural and sculptural paintings, the local tradition, the Neo-Byzantine style and the new ideas of the Italian Renaissance, giving thus rise to what became the “Brâncoveanu style.” The architectural Brâncovenesc style is found in the churches of the monasteries of Hurezi (where we intended to have his tomb), Rânmicul Sărat, and St. George’s New Church in Bucharest. The Mogosoia Palace in Bucharest is one example of secular architecture.

In June 1992, The Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church decreed the sanctification of Constantin Brancoveanu, his sons Constantin, Radu, Stefan and Matei, and son-in-law Ianache Văcărescu. They are commemorated on August 16. ■

**29th ANNUAL PILGRIMAGE CELEBRATION
August 13-15, 2016**

Host Hierarchy
His Eminence Archbishop NATHANIEL

and

Guest of Honor
His Grace Bishop PAUL
Bishop of the Midwest (OCA)

PILGRIMAGE SCHEDULE

Saturday, August 13

06:30 am Akathist, 3rd & 6th Hour
08:45 am Divine Liturgy
05:00 pm Light Supper
06:00 pm Vigil of the Resurrection

Sunday, August 14

09:00 am Akathist, 3rd & 6th Hour
10:00 am Hierarchal Divine Liturgy
05:00 pm Light Supper
06:30 pm Vigil with Lamentations

Monday, August 15

09:00 am Akathist, 3rd & 6th Hour, Vesting of Hierarchs
09:45 am Procession to the Pavilion
10:00 am Hierarchal Divine Liturgy
12:45 pm Lunch
02:30 pm Sacrament of Holy Unction Service
05:30 pm Great Vespers Service
07:00 pm Supper

Bookstore will be open except during services.

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