

Comments at Fr. Roman's 10th Anniversary Memorial

Saturday, May 3, 2025

Fr. John Konkle

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 Father 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 Father 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—Father Roman came up to me, and said, “While you're doing Proskomede, 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, Father 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 Father 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 Father 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 Father 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 Father Roman which he had received from the Holy Spirit.

I thought for a long time that Father 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 Father 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 Father Roman 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 really 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 Father 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 Father Roman and said that. It wouldn't even have occurred to me to say those words to Father 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 Father 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 Father Roman, and all of you think you were special to Father Roman—*because we all were*. And it's because when Father 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. Father 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 Father 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, Father 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 Father 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 Father 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 Father 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 Father Roman was still there, and if I knew him. I told him that I knew Father Roman well, but that he had recently reposed. I asked him if he had known Father 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 Father Roman, and had heard that Father 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 Father 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 Father Roman, but before he could say anything, Father Roman told him everything that he was going to say. His heart melted, and Father 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 Father 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 Father 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 Father Roman was dying? I went. But a few days before I departed, and before Father Roman reposed, this happened. I hadn't seen Father 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, "Father 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 Father 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." Father the Roman's final word to me: Take a backpack.

Christ has risen.