

God Is Always With You

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



Ms. Jessica Precop traveled to the Dormition of the Mother of God Monastery in Rives Junction, Michigan to interview Father Roman Braga, who grew up and served in Romania under a communist regime. We are very thankful to Ms. Precop, Father Roman, and the Sisterhood at the Monastery for making this interview possible.

Father, to start with, what can you tell us about the monastic way of life?

This is a good question. First, however, you have to understand the Romanian cultural environment when I was young – in the 1920's -1950's. The Romanian people, I think, were always inclined toward the monastic way of life, because being monastic and leading a monastic type life does not mean only to go and live in a monastery. When Jesus was preaching the gospel: "...if you love your mother and father more than Me you are not worthy of Me..." or when Jesus said "...if you don't take your cross and follow Me you are not worthy of Me...", Jesus was not speaking to monks; monks did not exist at that time. Jesus was speaking to people, single people, married people, everybody. So in a way, regarding the virtues, there is no difference between monks and lay people. The monastic virtues are for everyone. I will give you an example: those who want to dedicate their lives to Jesus, to the Church and who want to save their souls through the monastic way of life, become at times at odds with the parents wishes who may want their children to lead a secular life. But remember, God comes first in our life, then come the parents and the family.

First we must listen to God because He is the father of all of us. So there is a monastic element in that. Abstinence, for example, is not just for monks. In general married people need to exercise more abstinence than single people. Lay people as well need to exercise more abstinence than monastics. Abstinence means to abstain from food, from alcohol, from many other things. Or, in our culture here in America, we abstain from certain things only when we are forced into it by medical conditions. But God wants us to abstain from certain things so that we are not dominated by material things; to be free of material things. The material things are temporary; we cannot take them with us. As persons we have to grow. We cease to be a person when we are dominated by material things. Sex, drugs, alcohol, smoking, over-eating, and many other things like that make you a slave; you are no longer a free person. Well, God wants us to be free because He made us free and this is our likeness with God: "Let us make men according to our own image."

So the virtues are the same for married people as they are for monastics; The only difference is that the monastics go to a monastery, living in communities because they want to dedicate their lives to God without the social obligations. Monastics do not marry, instead they take a vow of virginity and of poverty. Why? Because they do not want to depend on possessions. Monks do not own land, do not own anything, other than their personal belongings. In the monasteries, the monks wear a habit- a special uniform if you wish - because they are considered the army of the Church, the soldiers of the Church. The Church depends on them.



Fr. Roman Braga of blessed memory, together with Ms. Jessica Precop

As we speak, there is a session of the OCA Holy Synod at our monastery today. The Holy Synod of a Church is made up of bishops. The Church needs bishops. The

bishops cannot be married, and they should be from among the monks. If the leaders of the Church come and tell you: “we need you for a bishop,” you cannot say no because you have to be obedient to the Church. Along with the vow of chastity and poverty the monk takes the also the vow of obedience. Or if the Church needs to send you somewhere to start a church you have to go. You don’t have possessions, a house to worry about: “oh I have a house, what to do with my house?” You have just a suitcase and you put in the necessary things and immediately you go. So obedience is another vow that the monks take.

As I said before, monks wear a habit. They wear long clothes and robes. This is outer monk, the monk that everybody sees. This “outer monk” so to speak is not for everyone. The inner monk is for everybody, in other words, the virtues of, abstinence, sacrifice, those are the same for the professed monk as well as for the lay person. So those monastic virtues; to deny yourself to take your cross, to abstain, these are for everybody. The virtues are the same and we go to the same place, married people and monks. And marriage is not an easy task. One needs much asceticism in marriage. You have three, four, five children, sometime you do not even eat, just let them eat, as you sacrifice yourself for them and others. So this is the difference between monks and lay people.

Romania has about 500 monasteries. There were always many monks and nuns in Romania. They are not cloistered; they go shopping, they go to the market. Romania is a small country, the size of the state of Ohio, and monks and nuns are influenced by the culture of the country. Even now the monasteries of Romania are full of nuns and monks. So it depends on the culture in which you live and the way you understand the gospel.

Can you tell us what led you to the monastic life?

I didn’t go to the monastery when I was young. I was in prison twice and after my first imprisonment I became a monk because I got more mature while in prison. When you experience suffering then you start meditating. I was a teacher. I was teaching in a high school in Bucharest. I was mature enough to understand life and to ask myself: “why am I not married at 30? and should I marry or not?” So the imprisonment gave me time to meditate and think: “What is better for me, should I marry and have a family or should I choose the monastic life?” And I decided that monastic life is for me to follow.

As a young boy I lived in a monastery, at the Seminary of Cernica in Bucharest and I loved monastic life, so for me monasticism was a natural way of life.

Can you talk about what it was like as a Christian to live under a communist regime?

As a Christian you had to make many compromises. For example, you have children and they go to school. And they are told in school there is no God and you do not have to pray and you do not have to have crosses around the neck and not to go to church. The children went home and grandma was praying with them and making the sign of the cross. We kept this Christian life in the family. Nothing could be manifest. You were not allowed to manifest your Christian life.

What happened to the churches and monasteries under the communist regime?

The churches were tolerated because Romania was basically a massive Orthodox country. The Church was very strong and the communist regime did not want to risk anything. Many monasteries, however, were closed. Only those that were declared historical monuments remained open, and Romanians were happy because almost all the monasteries were historical monuments. The communist regime transformed the monasteries into museums and they kept a few monks or nuns as tour guides to keep and take care of the museums and the huge libraries and archives that the monasteries possessed. And so the churches of the monasteries were also kept open. There was however a decree, decree #410 by the communist government to close all the monasteries who are not historic monuments and to force all monks and nuns under 50 years of age to leave the monasteries and go to work for the state. Only the old monks were allowed to stay in the monasteries to keep them open as historical monuments, and they kept the liturgical cycle of the Church: matins and vespers and liturgies, and they kept these all and they took care of themselves. Because people in Romania were Christians, they went to church in the monasteries and they helped these old monks and nuns. The communists couldn't control that, and they were not so much interested in the simple folks; they were interested especially in the intellectual class because the intellectual class creates the habits, the culture.

The communist regime persecuted mostly the Roman Catholic Church because it was the minority and it was mostly for foreigners. Romania is 90% Orthodox so they persecuted mostly the other denominations by taking their property and kicking them out. With Orthodoxy they didn't dare to go too far, so they pulled out young people from the monasteries but the old people still remained there and the churches of the monasteries were open and the liturgical cycles continued uninterrupted. During these times the monastic life was still going; it was not

striving, was not growing, but at least it was maintained.

How did your own struggles with the communist government impact your spiritual life?

The communists could not control what is inside of you, but you couldn't express what you were thinking, you were not able to express your opinion. And this not only as a monk or as a priest or as a Christian, but as an intellectual in general. Not all intellectuals in Romania during the communist regime were communists. In order to survive they were forced to say one thing but they believed something else in themselves. So they had a double life. It was one thing what they had in their mind and in their soul – their convictions, and another what they were expressing aloud. It was all a matter of survival. So that was a very, very difficult life. It was not like here where you are not afraid of anything. You are not afraid to express yourself; it was not like this. People were saying exactly what the government asked them to say in order to be able to have a job, to be a teacher, to have a profession, to be able to provide for their family their daily bread. But what they thought and believed the communist couldn't control.

We were happy in prison in a way. Let aside all the physical tortures Physical tortures are nothing. You suffer from them even, you can even die. But the communist imprisonment is worse than physical torture. They want to keep you at the limit of normal and abnormal, but they couldn't control what is inside of you. In a way, for a priest the communist prison was good because there in prison we were praying. Once you are convicted (of "crimes" you did not commit) you are placed in a cell, there is nothing else. They put the intellectuals and especially the priests in solitary confinement at least one or two years, and in a way that was very good for us. Not having anywhere to go or even look out a window because there were no windows in those cells of solitary confinement you have to look, to go somewhere; and so you go inside yourself, inside your heart and inside your mind to examine yourself, to see who you are and why God brought you into this world. You question whether God even exists, and what is your relationship with God.

When we were free we did not have time to ask ourselves these questions. Our faith was superficial because you can learn a lot of things and can have a mind like an Encyclopedia full of all the knowledge, but if you don't know yourself and who you are!. Even if you know everything in the world you are superficial if you do not ask yourself who am I? Why do I exist? What is the destiny of my life? Why did God create me? If I believe in God what does God want from me? These things when you live in freedom you do not ask yourself because you are in a hurry to do a lot of things, to read a lot of books and you become the slave of the books, the slave of

the knowledge, of concepts of philosophy and so on. But you do not have the time to meditate on who you are. When you are free you are made out of quotations from books. We were not allowed in prison to have any books. In 11 years I did not see a pencil or a piece of paper, or a book, and not only myself, but all the intellectuals and all the priests. The communists gave books and papers to read to simple folks because they wanted to convince them to become communists. They wanted, however, that the intellectuals be transformed into beasts, become like animals. The interesting thing is that it did not happen. Instead you became yourself because you started to examine yourself. Once you were out of prison, they were interested that you do not make propaganda to tell others what happened in prison, and so on and so many of us were expelled from the country just so we do not tell the others what was going on in prison.

How did you witness Christ in prison?

In prison most of the time you were by yourself. I was in a forced labor camp too. In the forced labor camp we had our groups of prayer and we had priests that were hearing confessions. Each priest had a group around him. We witnessed Christ more in the forced labor camp because there was not too much control there. It was a large community and the communists were interested in how much you worked. In prison it was impossible to witness Christ, even if you were alone or maybe two in the same cell. Sometimes there were four in the same cell, but you only talked to a small group of people. In the forced labor camps we even had the liturgy there because we had priests, without vestments and without anything else other than a piece of bread, and some tonic wine that the doctors in the hospital provided. I was in a forced labor camp with 16,000 people, and there was a hospital and the doctors were from among the prisoners so they provided tonic wine for us for the liturgy and we spared two pieces of bread from breakfast and so we had liturgy. The guards did not know we had liturgy; as they were passing by, they thought we were just babbling; we sure did not show it. I remember in prison though, in the cell, a priest had liturgy under the blanket; when the guard entered he covered everything with the blanket.

Why is suffering important as a Christian?

Suffering is good not only for Christians but for everybody. Because if you do not suffer you do not understand anything. Suffering is a good experience. And in the scriptures it says that suffering is a sign that God loves you. In the Epistle to Hebrew Chapter 13, St. Paul says that if you do not suffer you are not children of God. Who is the Father who does not chastise His children? He punishes His children because He loves them. If you do not suffer you are not the sons of God.

After you experience suffering, you understand more and better things in this world, much deeper than the others who do not experience any suffering. So suffering is maturing you in your spiritual life. You should not avoid suffering but you should not look for it. God takes care of that. There is a lot of suffering in the world. So many families who have children in the hospital. My doctor has a daughter 11 years of age with bone cancer; they are young, what a suffering for that family whose daughter may be dying. We ask ourselves why?

God allows into this world to have beggars and crippled people and all this because otherwise we would not be able to be charitable. We have to exercise our love because love is not just the word, is it something that we must do. And you do things for those who need them. So that is why there are orphan children and crippled people and so many other things, for us to exercise our love for our neighbor because Jesus said love God with your whole heart and whole mind but love your neighbor as you love yourself. But if my neighbor does not need my love what is love? Just a hand shake? That is not love. Or to give him a hug? That is nothing. Go there and take a crippled person on the street and give him a hug and ask him what can I do for you? That is love. Not to live for yourself; to live for others and always to deny yourself; to forget yourself and remember that others exist. That is Christian life. Not to say "what about me, and me, and I;" Who are you? You are nobody. Try not to pay too much attention to you. But when you say can I do something for you? Maybe you need me? That is meaningful Christian love. So suffering in this world is permitted by God that other Christians might concentrate their love on those suffering people and do something for them, to sacrifice themselves for them. In our own life suffering is permitted so we understand why Jesus was crucified.

I am able to forgive. I pray for those guards that tortured us in prison. I am not against them because I understand they were forced to do that. And you forgive only when you suffer. When you do not suffer you do not want to forgive, then you are condemned. There was a movie-maker who came and made a movie with me and Fr. Calciu. The interviewer said "how can you forgive them?" Well why not? They are the image of God. We know that in that kind of regime they were forced to kill us, to torture us, to do what they were told to do, otherwise their families would not have bread to eat. You are able to forgive when you suffer. When you do not suffer you are not able to forgive. You say "no, no, no, you should not do such and such a thing and if you do you should be punished because you did it". So suffering is very important in Christian life.

How is life in America different than your experience in Romania?

I thought I came to a free country. And that is true; you have the freedom to do anything you want, as long as you do not hurt anybody. If you hurt anybody for sure you have to suffer the consequences. Speaking of the freedom of conscious and thought, I doubt that we are free because being free to do everything you can destroy yourself if you are not mature. Freedom without responsibility is not freedom. Only when you are prevented of doing what you want to do, then you understand freedom. But when you say "I want to do everything I want" you are not free. Think about Genesis, the first book in the Bible, when God created man, he did not understand what freedom was until God told him you cannot touch this tree; the tree is a symbol, it is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. So if God created man free, then you ask why He gave him a limit: "do not touch this." Without this limit man cannot understand what freedom is. Freedom is just a word if you do not have restrictions. So freedom without discipline is not freedom. And many in our culture here in America think that they do not have to respect anything or anybody; they are free to do everything. This is not freedom.

What are some ways we can find Christ today, in the American society?

Well Christ first of all is in you. Christ is not just some nice guy. He is God and God is within you. God is in our conscious, in our heart, in our minds, is not something material you see outside of yourself. You find God in yourself. You descend in your personality. We are eternal, we never die, the body is going to the cemetery but the conscious, the person is continually living. So when you descend into yourself, your conscious is infinite. And this infinity is the temple of the living God. St. Paul says many times you are the temple of the living God because God lives within you. You find God when you know yourself, when you know who you are. If you neglect that, "I don't have time to think about myself" you will never find God because God is not something material, you do not find him in a specific place. God is always with you if you want Him to be with you. You find God when you find yourself. "Who am I?" Pay attention to these verses of the scriptures: "you are the temple of the living God because God lives within you." And Jesus said: "remain in Me and I in you. I am the vine and you are the branches" if you do not remain in me you do not have sap to feed yourself and you dry up. People who complain they do not feel God they are dry branches. They have to remain in Christ and to accept Christ by saying: "Lord, come, I am here. You created me. Open my heart because You created this heart. You created the door, enter please."

You have to talk with God everywhere you are. Walking on the street, driving the

car, you can say “Lord You are in the front seat, I know that You are here tell me something. Why did You create me?” You have a lot of things, an infinite number of things to converse with God and God wants you to talk with Him because prayer is not as much as you read in the book or how long you are kneeling, prayer is the whole life. When you eat, when you drink, when you drive the car, when you discipline your children: You are in a state of prayer. Life is a liturgy. It is not only in church that liturgy takes place, the liturgy is outside the church building too. The whole life should be a liturgy- if you have the feeling of the existence of God. But you have to get that feeling of the existence of God... how? I always say, especially to young people, have a dialogue, a permanent dialogue with God. Sure you are busy: you eat, you prepare your exam if you are a student, you work and you are very busy but always say: “Lord I know You are here I didn’t forget You. Look at me and do not abandon me.” See many times this permanent dialogue with God becomes a prayer because prayer is a communication between man and God.

Prayer is not just a short time and you say “I finished my prayer” and that’s it; you never finish your prayer. The definition of prayer is this: the feeling of the presence of God in you. And if you have this feeling of the presence of God you are in a continual prayer. If you pray only when you pray you don’t pray at all one of the monks said. So don’t pray only when you pray, you pray all the time because prayer is not “give me, give me.” Prayer is to say I love you and I want to spend time with you. Ask God something. And don’t worry God is answering you even if you don’t think it. He’s giving you good hints and good suggestions on how to resolve your problems. So to find God in our culture here is to be conscious that God exists first and God exists not outside of yourself but inside. And God is always with you and you can get the feeling of the existence of God.

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