

THE LIGHT OF TABOR IN NORTHERN CALIFORNIA¹

By Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis

We were walking, the white-bearded French priest and I, down the steep winding path in the late hour of the night, at that moment when the stars appear brightest before yielding to the day. The valley at our feet, against the background of a rich pine forest, wore a partial veil of fog which was slit in one of its folds by what, at that time and place, could only give the impression of being a holy mirage: up from the wispy waves rose the clear contours of a Slavic country church, its onion dome and many armed crosses inviting the world around to join in the chorus of forest and stars in the cool of the night, as if the whole panorama had suddenly been animated by the mystical brush of Chagall and each creature within it felt itself soaring beyond its usual confines. About half-way down the road, with the sound of our steps on the gravel seeming astoundingly loud, my friend stopped a moment and said "We could be in the Urals!"

But this was neither the Urals nor the Black Forest: we were descending one side of Dead Horse Canyon, just north of Ukiah in Northern California, not far from US 101 and the small town of Redwood Valley, near topographical points with more biblical-sounding names: Mt. Sanhedrin, Potter Valley. We were guests at the Byzantine Catholic Monastery of Mount Tabor where "transfiguration," as we soon found out, is everyday fare. I wondered then whether any other setting in the world could be more conducive to "looking for God's face in the night" and singing his praises just before the crack of dawn. I still rather doubt it. The presence in that place of that particular church and the other monastic buildings around it, built by the monks' own hands and combining as they do a rustic humility with a very compelling aura of sacred beauty, has always seemed to me nothing short of a miracle.

This was not the first time I was walking on these monastic grounds in the middle of the night, nor the first time I caught myself

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exclaiming interiorly that this community must be the best kept and most exciting secret in the Catholic Church in America. My first visit had taken place some eleven years ago, when the only "monastic buildings" to speak of were a converted ranch house at the hilltop (with the chapel in what used to be the living room) and a battered old trailer by the entrance to the property, which served as "guest house." (I shall never forget the devoutly comic scene of a friend and me attempting to make our way blindly at 2 a.m. from trailer to chapel... they'd forgotten in their recollection to lend us a flashlight!) Not even in the earliest days, when they themselves hardly had a place to "lay their heads," did those monks turn away any pilgrim that knocked on their door. And it wasn't only the trailer one was admitted to: at prayer, at meals, on walks, during spontaneous conversations, one had the impression of *already* belonging to this family, since these men saw themselves as none other than the family of Jesus. By definition, therefore, any member of the family of Jesus (and who, at least potentially, is not?) *already* had a claim upon their home and heart.

All is for holiness

In the society in which we live today neither the material nor the spiritual nor the simply human aspects of this "miracle" ought to go unnoticed, so rare and so precious are they. At a time when so many are rushing to the big city, eager to find their success there, these men, along with the genuine monks of all times, are fleeing the city for the wilderness to find their "success" in poverty, prayer and song. At a time when even most religious institutes are feverishly embracing secularism as a self-evident and compelling new dogma, this community, in fidelity to the Church Fathers, stakes its all on the cult of God's *holiness*, seeing in this occupation the real source of the world's greatest fruit. In our self-reliant age, when most of us function on the premise that a task which I myself do not accomplish will simply not get done, these lovers of God's goodness and beauty do not cease with fervent voices to implore *Him* not to forsake His world and to be present above all to those who spurn Him. All of this they do in the conviction that tracing the stream of existence back to its source cannot but intensify the water's quality and abundance, and that if they themselves drink there they will be in a better position to show others the way to cure chronic thirst.

The story of Mount Tabor Monastery began some seventeen years ago (1972) in Detroit. Cardinal Dearden had extended an invitation to found a Byzantine monastery near Detroit to an experienced Flemish monk, now Father Abbot Boniface, who had already successfully established one monastery in Africa. The cardinal's receptivity eventually led to the encounter and friendship in Christ between Father Boniface and a young Ukrainian-American, now Father Michael, who was seeking to immerse himself in the spiritual riches of his Eastern

Catholic tradition. From the beginning of their association, which first took concrete hold in the hamlet of Dorris in Northern California, these two men—the weathered monk and the eager novice—endeavored to live the monastic life according to the Eastern tradition in the strictest way possible.

This is the Gospel

To us Westerners this may sound exotic, but what is involved is no more, no less than the radicalness of the Christian Gospel: an intense life of prayer, both personal and liturgical, that celebrates the ongoing presence in the Church of Christ's mysteries and intercedes before God for all the world (the long intercessory prayers with particular petitions leave no doubt as to the monks' sense of vital involvement in the world's pressing needs); long periods in solitude, disposing the monk to enter fully into the divine life; a lively and solicitous charity, manifesting the joy of the Body of Christ in even two brothers living in peace; study of the Sacred Word and the patristic writings; humble work of the hands, to provide for the body's needs; finally, an attitude of hospitality that shows that no Christian community can be a clique but must always strive to welcome all whom God sends.

These were the characteristics of the Mount Tabor community before it had a name and when it counted only two members, and these are the traits that make it such an oasis of Christian life today. Abbot Boniface and Father Michael like to use the phrase, "a chronicle of graces," to refer to the journey leading from materially scanty beginnings to an established monastery, belonging to the Ukrainian Eparchy (Diocese) of Chicago, with eight consecrated (solemnly professed) monks, a novice, twelve "aggregate" monks and nuns (a rough equivalent of our Western "oblates," but with more physical ties to the monastery) and an extended lay family of many dozen "in the world."

Such fruitfulness, springing from the association of two friends who sought above all to live the Gospel, cannot be experienced in the concrete more intensely than at the community's Sunday morning Divine Liturgy. The chilly silence in the pre-dawn church, just before Matins, with many little flames flickering before the icons that make the whole communion of saints present, opens out a window into the heart of the monk's vocation to solitude and interiority. But the joyous mid-morning Eucharistic Liturgy manifests in the most tangible way possible that, although the Christian's life begins and ends in the bosom of the Holy Trinity, the path there leads through Christ's sacred *enanthroposis*, the Incarnation, and engages the whole human community and the whole material created order. By 9:45 the small wooden church is filled to cracking. The abbot has to be deft as he swings his censer all around the walls during the preparatory rites, carefully avoiding crowded heads and elbows. The children, for sheer glee and noise level, almost seem to outnumber the adults. I have never seen so