

mother house: the abbot and four others, all over seventy in age. Clearly it was a dying order.

In the deep woods surrounding the monastery there was a little hut that a rabbi from a nearby town occasionally used for a hermitage. Through their many years of prayer and contemplation the old monks had become a bit psychic, so they could always sense when the rabbi was in his hermitage. "The rabbi is in the woods, the rabbi is in the woods again," they would whisper to each other. As he agonized over the imminent death of his order, it occurred to the abbot at one such time to visit the hermitage and to ask the rabbi if by some possible chance he could offer any advice that might save the monastery.

The rabbi welcomed the abbot at this hut. But when the abbot explained the purpose of his visit, the rabbi could only commiserate with him. "I know how it is," he exclaimed. "The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore." So the old abbot and the old rabbi wept together. Then they read parts of the Torah and quietly spoke of deep things. The time came when the abbot had to leave. They embraced each other. "It has been a wonderful thing that we should meet after all these years," the abbot said, "but I have still failed in my purpose for coming here. Is there nothing you can tell me, no piece of advice you can give me that would help me save my dying order?"

"No, I am sorry," the rabbi responded. "I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you."

When the abbot returned to the monastery his fellow monks gathered around him to ask, "Well, what did the rabbi say?" "He couldn't help," the abbot answered. "We just wept and read the Torah together. The only thing he did say, just as I was leaving—it was something cryptic—was that the Messiah is one of us. I don't know what he meant."

In the days and weeks and months that followed, the old monks pondered this and wondered whether there was any possible significance to the rabbi's words. The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us monks here at the monastery? If that's the case, which one? Do you suppose he meant the abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant Father Abbot. He has been our leader for more than a generation. On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas. Certainly Brother Thomas is a holy man. Everyone knows that Thomas is a man of light. Certainly he could not have meant Brother Elred! Elred gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even though he is a thorn in people's sides, when you look back on it, Elred is virtually always right. Often very right. Maybe the rabbi did mean Brother Elred. But surely not Brother Philip. Philip is so passive, a real nobody. But then, almost mysteriously he has a gift for somehow always being there when you need him. He must magically appear by your side. Maybe Philip is the Messiah. Of course the rabbi didn't mean me. He couldn't

possibly have meant me. I'm just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did? Suppose I am the Messiah? O God, not me. I couldn't be that much for You, could I?

As they contemplated in this manner, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one among them might be the Messiah. And on the off, off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.

Because the forest in which it was situated was beautiful, it so happened that people still occasionally came to visit the monastery to picnic on its tiny lawn, to wander along some of its paths, even now and then to go into the dilapidated chapel to meditate. As they did so, without even being conscious of it, they sensed this aura of extraordinary respect that now began to surround the five old monks and seemed to radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of the place. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling, about it. Hardly knowing why, they began to come back to the monastery more frequently to picnic, to play, to pray. They began to bring their friends to show them this special place. And their friends brought their friends.

Then it happened that some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the old monks. After a while one asked if he could join them. Then another. And another. So within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order and, thanks to the rabbi's gift, a vibrant center of light and spirituality in the realm.

*From The Different Drum  
by M. Scott Peck (pp. 13-15)*

## WOMEN WHO FOLLOWED THE LORD

*This month: Thecla of Iconium*

Thecla was born in Iconium, to an eminent pagan family. At the age of eighteen this well-educated, articulate young woman was betrothed to a man of high standing in the



pagan community. But it was also during her eighteenth year that Paul and Barnabas, as we read in the Book of Acts, shook from their feet the dust of Antioch where they had been persecuted, and headed for Iconium. There, Paul and Barnabas "entered together into the Jewish synagogue, and so spoke that a great company believed, both of Jews and of Greeks." Driven out again by persecution, they nevertheless, after having preached in other cities, came back to Iconium "strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the Kingdom of God. And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in Whom they believed" (Acts 14:22-3).

One of those who heard and believed was the young Thecla. She listened to them, then came back a second day, and then an evening, and a third day and evening, to hear more of what Paul and Barnabas were saying. By the end of that time she was a committed Christian and had made up her mind to live in virginity. She no longer had the slightest interest in marriage, desiring now to give her whole life and self to God, and certainly had no interest in the fiancé her parents had chosen for her, eminent and wealthy though he might be.

Thecla's mother was far from pleased. In those days, of course, parents had much stricter control over their children's lives than they do today, and to disobey the wishes of one's parents was a serious matter indeed. Added to this was the fact of Thecla's own family's high standing in the community. To be a professing and practicing Christian was still dangerous and certainly socially unacceptable, and a young girl who didn't wish to marry was an oddity at best. The mother tried talking, she tried beating, she tried starving Thecla, all to no avail. Finally she turned her daughter over to the authorities, in whose hands the first of the miracles of the young woman's life took place. The judge ordered her thrown into the flames, but she came out unharmed. She followed Saint Paul and his entourage to Antioch. There, one of the city leaders tried to seduce her, and when she forcefully resisted him he denounced her to the governor as a Christian who had an "unwomanly hatred" of marriage. She was condemned to death and thrown to the wild beasts, but they did not touch her. The amazed governor asked her, "Who are you and what is the power that you have in you, that nothing can do you harm?" Thecla answered simply, "I am a servant of the living God."

Perhaps because Thecla's was not the only story of wonderful powers of faith and strength which the governor was hearing, he let her go. It was a strange time of vicious persecutions of Christians on the one hand, and these constant examples of willing, even joyful, forbearance under torture on the other. The pagans, at least those who saw these things happening before their eyes, must have been uneasy or wondering at least. In any case Thecla's release by the governor freed her to preach the Gospel and she brought many people to faith in Christ.

But like others before her, Thecla found it difficult to stay in the larger world. With Saint Paul's permission, she retreated to a solitary place near Seleucia. She became known for her powers of healing, performing miracles over many sick people and bringing them to Christ in this way. Though she lived in the strictest kind of asceticism, owning nothing and carrying on a life of prayer and fasting daily, her solitary retreat became a place of pilgrimage not only for the sick, but for those who wanted her counsel on spiritual matters.

Even in her simplicity, though, Thecla could not altogether escape the world and its rivalries, jealousies and evils. Some of the pagan doctors in Seleucia, jealous of her abilities and popularity, sent young men to assault her. They did this believing that if she lost her virginity she might also lose her healing powers. Thecla fled from these young men and prayed for deliverance. God opened a rock as a hiding place for her, and she concealed herself there until she died.

St. John Chrysostom was later to write of Thecla, "I seem to see this blessed virgin going to Christ with virginity in one hand and martyrdom in the other." We might be tempted to ask why her virginity is stressed in this way, and it is important to realize that it is not because the Church believed that women who remained virgins were better than those who married. (It is true that early Church writers stressed the value of a virginal life as one that could be wholly given to God, but marriage was also valued by most of them.) Thecla's virginity was a way she chose to devote everything in herself to God. That she retained it was a sign of her steadfastness in being true to that choice. And her remaining a virgin was also a sign that the world, no matter how it tries, can never really overcome the resolve of a person to belong only to God. Some mighty worldly powers were thrown against Thecla, but she resisted them all.

Thecla is one of those who makes our excuses for not being true apostles seem pretty shabby. She did the work of the Lord despite many obstacles and negatives. If she could, so can we.

*Published monthly except July and August  
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Diocese of the Armenian Church  
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New York, New York 10016*

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Subscription: \$5.00 a year.  
Bulk rates for parishes and schools are available  
and will be furnished upon request.