

Who should be sent to a parish and for how long

Those who intend to send a drug-addict to a parish or monastery should properly prepare him for living there. This preparation will determine to a large extent how fruitful not only his initial but also his entire church life will be. Certainly, church workers will not regard the failure to inchurch him as a complete collapse. They would rather believe it a success if a rehabilitee proves to be able at least to continue living without any relapses into narcotization. But to achieve even this modest result a patient should be given proper guidance during his stay at a parish.

The preparation should be carried out individually with each of those who wish, after the rehabilitation at an Orthodox center, such as the Mill Brook, to stay for a time at a parish. First of all it is advisable to clarify a rehabilitant's idea of parish life in order to fill any gaps he may have in it or to marshal it. First of all, a former drug-addict should have a clear understanding of the purpose of his going to a parish. He himself should be questioned about it and his answer will show if there is any sense at all in sending him to a parish.

However different these answers may be, they will reveal the rehabilitant's desire either to be inchurched, which is preferable, or just to improve by adopting a different way of life in an Orthodox milieu. The desire of a rehabilitant to change himself, to work at self-improvement, is a good reason for sending him to a parish.

Unfortunately, a drug-addict often sees his future stay at a parish as a penalty he is to serve for his criminal past – an onerous, though temporary, voluntary exile for him to salve his conscience or to appease his family. It is often parents who want their torment of a son to be sent away for a stay at a parish, hoping it will benefit him or simply wishing to have some rest from him and who force a former drug-addict to agree to this “exile”. If this is exactly the motive, such patient must not be sent to a parish. A parish is not a prison or a place for penal servitude where youth is buried. Certainly, a former drug-addict may express other inappropriate reasons for his stay at a parish, and it takes insight to identify them.

How long may be the parish stay a rehabilitant has to set himself to? In the unanimous opinion of priests who know this problem from experience, the stay should be fairly long, somewhere between half a year and a year and a half, and may be even longer. But it will not be decided by a rehabilitant alone but together with his confessor. A rehabilitant's departure from the parish without the permission of his confessor often has undesirable consequences. But too long a

stay should also be avoided. The confessor will make his suggestion.

A reservation should be made here. Drug-addicts (and their parents) tend to believe they already know how long their parish stay should be and to resent any amendment made to this term. But as soon as a newcomer arrives at a parish he may find this particular parish's way of life and its dwellers not quite suitable for the in-churching of a rehabilitant. Or, the community may find this particular rehabilitee unfit not because he is bad or hopeless but different, a person who may be invaluable at another place. Therefore, the wish of the parish confessor to transfer this patient to some other place should not be viewed as a verdict or rejection. In fact, it may also happen that a rehabilitant has proved to violate the life of a parish so much that the sooner he leaves the better, even without any recommendation to be transferred to another parish.

What is a drug-addict to expect from a parish and what is to be expected of him  
Parishes which admit drug-addicts after their rehabilitation at a rehabilitation center, such as the Mill, may considerably differ from one another. Without complicating my task, I will simply explain what awaits a promising graduate of such a center when he comes to the parish where I am rector and confessor, and what are the things we expect him ideally to understand. Many considerations, but not all, will be true for other parishes as well. First of all, let me say a few words about our Parish of St. George.

The parish is located at the northern bank of the Gorkovsky Reservoir. The access to it from the south and east is blocked by a river and from the north by woods and marshes. It can be approached from the west by a dirt road which ends at the Vala River. Crossing it by a small wooden bridge a rehabilitant comes into a small village called Georgievskoye. There are no villagers except for church workers. There have been no women workers for several years now. The backbone of our small brotherhood is made up of four monks. The number of dwellers, including rehabilitants, fluctuates from six to twelve. In their opinion, our parish is a perfect place for self-improvement in the service of God.

What would we like those, not only former drug-addicts, who want to live with us to understand? What should they be prepared for? Let us consider it point by point.

1. Every newcomer to the parish should seek to hear, feel and understand those who live next to him, to feel the atmosphere of the parish and try not to destroy it. The entry itself should be as quiet as possible, so that a newcomer could see the life the people lived before him and the

good things that unite them for him to avoid distorting the established relations but enrich their life with his own spiritual riches. But this is how it should be ideally. At the least, a newcomer should avoid dropping out of the common life and should be able to accept delicate hints that may be dropped at the mistakes he may make in his behaviour. If the common life begins with direct criticism and, God forbid, reproofs, it will bring no joy or benefit to anyone.

2. Upon his arrival a newcomer will be put up in a cell, explained where he can go and where he cannot and informed about the order of life at the parish. In the rest of the things, such as whom to imitate and from whom to learn, he will have to pattern his behaviour on his own. Whatever is prohibited to the brethren is prohibited to him, but not all that permitted to long-standing dweller is permitted to him. It is obvious on the whole, but details had better be clarified.

Now we move to the most important thing. If a newcomer asks questions, he will get answers as brethren see them, but if he does not ask questions, nobody will impose his teaching on him because the status of a teacher is difficult to combine with one's modest opinion of oneself. On the other hand, as people tend to turn a deaf ear to any uncalled-for teaching, any attempt to bring them to reason will be a waste of the teacher's breath. Ascetics used to regard such didactic uncalled-for discourses as idle talk. Even the confessor will not thrust his advice on a newcomer, even less so the rector whose first concern is to see to it that the divine services are conducted in a proper way, the second is to control the external life of the parish, the third is his sacred duty to see to it that relations between the brethren are peaceful, and a lot of other concerns. The principal concern for one's own salvation has to be taken by oneself. "Our task is to create conditions for your salvation, while you yourself take care of it", as St. Moses the Abbot of Optina used to say.

This is the point at which many tend to stumble. A newcomer may feel neglected, but it is not so. A little time ago, everyone would intrude upon him – school teachers, parents, friends, a girl-friend, rehabilitation center workers – and he was accustomed to this, but things are different at the parish. For instance, when he is engaged in some task, others will look at him in passing and make no remark. He will decide that his performance is approved or his initiative is encouraged. Actually, there are no good reasons for such a conclusion. Only if a newcomer asks whether he is doing his task properly or the right thing at all, he will, suddenly for him, hear from a brother what is wrong with his performance. He will be stopped only if he is doing something that can result in a trouble or considerable damage for the parish or himself. Even in this case he will be given time to think better of it or to ask beforehand. This is an example concerning obediences. It is even more important for a newcomer to learn to ask questions about spiritual life.

Therefore, from the very beginning a newcomer should look at things closely, listen attentively and ask about everything from those who can give instruction. Otherwise he runs the risk of losing orientation altogether and wasting his time.

3. There is another thing that bewilders rehabilitants. Nobody praises them on a well-done task. For many, work is something they have started doing only at the parish and every task they have fulfilled is a great achievement for them, but there is no praise, only a very modest approval sometimes. Chagrined, they let down and lose any desire to do anything. But such is the brotherhood's tradition: the welfare of the parish is not to be built on the exploitation of its dwellers' vanity.

4. Let us now speak in more detail about obedience. Those who come to a parish for salvation should dispose themselves to comply with every request from its rector and any member of the community. They are given an opportunity to show their love for their co-dwellers most convincingly by treating their every request as obligatory. Nobody at the parish would give orders or commands. The community has just made it a rule to comply with reasonable requests of the neighbors in order to make life easier for one another. As the rector is the one who takes care of everybody, his requests are to be complied with first of all. Everything is done without pressure, in a family-like manner. But if somebody ignores requests from his co-dwellers over and over again, especially those of the rector, he thus shows his reluctance to share life with us. Then he can just as well separate himself from them physically by moving to another place. And this wish of his to get separated should be granted peacefully, without his taking offence. Nor will anybody have a grudge against him simply because it is a common failure.

What are the confusions caused by the rule of obedience? First, many tend to pay no heed to a simple request expressed in two or three quiet words. If you goggle at them and raise your voice and stamp your foot and then threaten them with sanctions, they will understand that they should go and fulfill an obedience. Ordered in this way, an obedience means violence against a novice, while there is no violence in a humble request. In Point 2 above, too, there is no violence in a delicate hint but only a message given to a brother about his mistake, while there is violence present in a critical remark and all the more so in a reproof. But no one who seeks well-being for himself wishes to use violence against his neighbor. And if a brother persists in his reluctance to live in mutual understanding and unity, why should we let him violate the established order of life at our parish? Let him find a place for himself where people communicate in an aggressive and tough language understandable for him. We cannot make concessions on this account.

Another mistake concerning obedience, equally frequent and no less dangerous, is that most

people believe the principal aim of obedience is to achieve a maximum success in whatever they do, while its actual goal is salvation, which demands that one should sever his own will. The entire dogmatic meaning of Orthodox asceticism may be expressed in a single phrase: "May Thy, not mine, will be done, O Lord". On the other hand, Alistair Crowley, one of the most famous satanists of the last century, teaches that the shortest way to make a person demonic can be also expressed in a single phrase: "Do whatever you wish". Therefore, the principal rule concerning obedience at the parish reads: "Do your task not as you think the best, but as you are asked to do it". It is really a very difficult rule to observe as your whole nature rebels when you know how to do a given task in the best and quickest way but have to do it differently, or when you are certain it is better to do this now, not that. When St. Moses of Optina was asked what was the most difficult thing to do at his monastery, he answered it was to obey.

There is certain alleviation to this "tough" rule. A parish dweller is permitted to express once his opinion on the task he is to do if it seems to him he knows the best way to fulfill it or the reason for putting off or for not doing it at all. But after he speaks up, he has to fulfill the task as asked no matter whether his reasoning was heeded or not. When his differing opinion is accepted, it is not disobedience on his part only if he simply expressed his intention without argument or insistence.

5. Now concerning repentance. At our parish, the confessor asks a newcomer to come for his first confession a week or two after his arrival. During this time the newcomer will see how the land lies, become a little accustomed to the surrounding and calm down to be able to look into himself, which is so important for taking this sacrament. The confessor, on his part, will look closely him and begin to feel him. A newcomer is recommended to make a general confession, that is, to tell the confessor about all the considerable and significant sins he remembers, beginning from his childhood. It would be a good thing to tell him also about one's parents, friends, important and critical events in one's life, one's interests and values. But it must be a well-self-disciplined talk before God, on no account a chatter. Both the confessor and the one who makes confession are under judgment and both should keep their talk secret – the requirement not understood by all. The confessor is required to keep secret, while the one who makes confession is not. But, taking one's confession, a confessor also opens his heart, seeking to be utterly sincere. Confessors are often betrayed.

A person who begins a religious life should have at least some idea of Repentance. It has two components: reconciliation with God and penance for sins. The first stage is quick to go through. If a person condemns his sinful past and promises to live a good life according to the commandments, he immediately receives an access to God and opportunity to participate in church life (though many confessors do not believe it an excessive measure to keep some penitent sinners from taking communion for a more or less long time). The second stage as the hard work of penance assigned by God will last long years, however ardent a sinner may be in

his repentance. It will be inevitably long in case of a former drug-addict and will take much patience. Those who used to overindulge in sin will normally make a little spiritual progress. This is to say that having committed many grave sins, one should abandon hope for special spiritual insights, revelations or gifts from God.

The parish life centers on the rector and the confessor. At most parishes the confessor and the rector are one and the same person, just as it is at our parish. It is very difficult for a parish dweller to be sincere and tell the nastiest things about himself to the confessor who is also the rector on whom his life depends. A newcomer would find his present misdeeds, even minor ones, even harder to confess than those he committed in his former life, in another place and among other people. He has to reflect on his situation beforehand and, however difficult it may be, try to understand and accept that confidence in the confessor is something on which his spiritual life and that of the parish as whole depends. In addition to understanding, he has to have courage. Sincerity and openness are essential. But it becomes ever more difficult when he begins an inner fight against the confessor himself – and who can boast to be free from this inner fight coming occasionally to test your integrity? The parish old-timers know that after confessing such thoughts they will not be punished, though even they try to watch their language, while for a newcomer, especially one with a bitter past and unstable present, to make a sincere confession about this fight is almost unthinkable. But I can assure you, and most confessors will agree with me, that a newcomer will not make a mistake if he brings himself to say to his confessor what he sometimes thinks about him.

And the final point in our talk about confession. In many cases a serious offence is likely to be committed by several brethren together. Some will immediately regret having done it and will want to repent, while others will not hurry into repentance. But in a small brotherhood, if one of the brothers confesses a common offence, even if he does not want to give away the others but only to repent, the confessor, not always but often, needs not to be an astute sleuth to figure out easily the accessories and the degree of their complicity. And the one who wants to confess knows this. So, what shall he do – go to confess or not? If the confessor tries to be father to his charges, then he should go and confess without any hesitation. If the confessor is obviously not father, then this question has no immediate answer, for it depends on the situation.

6. What should a novice do if he sees his mate sinning? This question was considered thoroughly in the Fourth Homily by Father Dorotheus. Let us cite this important passage:

“If you witness a brother committing a sin, you should not defy him and hush up his action, thus helping him to perish. Nor should you reproach him or say spiteful things about him, but with compassion and fear of God report him to the one who can reform him, or the witness himself

may tell him with love and humbleness, saying this: 'Forgive me, brother, if I am not mistaken, we are not doing good'. If he does not listen to you, tell another whom you know he trusts or tell his starets or confessor, depending on the gravity of the sin, so that they may reform him, and then you calm down. But do it to reform your brother, not to do an idle and malicious talk or reproach him or expose and condemn him or pretend to reform him while cherishing the said intentions. For, verily, whoever tells about it to the confessor himself, but does it not to reform the neighbour or to avoid damage for oneself, commits a sin, for this is a malicious talk. But he must ask his heart whether it has some prejudiced motivation, and if it has, he must keep silent.

However, if he, having looked at himself closely, sees that he wants to confess out of compassion and for the other's benefit, while having some inner confusion about his own intention, he must tell the confessor with humbleness about himself and the other, saying this: My conscience tells me that I want to make this confession to reform my brother, but I can feel some mixed intention in me. And then the confessor will tell him whether to make the confession or not... When one's confession is made only for the benefit of one's brother, God will not allow this confession to ensue in confusion, sorrow or harm".

7. There are hardly ignoramuses who have not heard that God has given the commandment of love. But some sinners contrive to interpret this commandment for their own benefit. For instance, they believe that if they are given an opportunity to stay at a parish, then, despite their past and the present nasty behaviour, God and His servants will cherish and please these sinners in all possible ways, shut their eyes to their boorishness and laziness and satisfy their every whim. I can assure you that no parish understands love in this way. A newcomer to a parish should not indulge in illusions about it. Moreover, many weaknesses, which are neglected in a secular society, will be disapproved at a parish. Among them are smoking and slang. Besides, it is not difficult to guess that as most of those who serve at the church are themselves only making their first steps on the way to salvation, they are still far from being perfect in love. Here, too, a newcomer has to be ready for most unexpected temptations.

8. Every person needs something, some getting by with little, others needing more. If something you need is not available, what do you do? You may ask for it, but if it is denied to you, you feel embarrassment and grumble – this is the level of beginners. You may not ask for something you need but wait till it is offered to you. And when it is offered, you accept it immediately with gratitude – this is the level of those who have made a considerable progress. Finally, if something you need is offered to you, you may first refuse to accept it, but if you are persuaded to take it, you agree to accept it and thank God for it – this is the level of the ascetics who are close to perfection. What is the level of those young people who come from a rehabilitation center? The answer is obvious. It would be good therefore if they at least manage to stand fast on the level of beginners; for even those who have lived at a parish for a long time do not venture upon a greater achievement. There is a common rule at our parish: you tell to the rector

or the senior brother without ceremony about any need you feel or any domestic problem you have encountered. In doing so, you have to be ready for a refusal. If the request you make is not satisfied for some reason or neglected, you should not feel vexed or embarrassed and should not grumble. The refusal should not prevent you from asking again later.

9. Rehabilitants have to work much at the parish. First, it is objectively necessary for the parish to survive in the present situation of devastation and poverty. Secondly, understood correctly, work is a first step on the ladder of spiritual improvement and cannot be skipped over. This is how Holy Fathers defined these steps: a) getting rid of rough passions in the work of obedience; b) singing psalms (verbal prayer); c) saying a silent prayer; d) contemplating. The first step is correspondent to the level of novices and pious lay people; the second step to the level of monks; the third step to the level recluses; the fourth step can be only reached by a few spiritually gifted ascetics. The knowledge of these steps can prevent using newcomers to a parish as a labour force. But if a rehabilitant does want to engage himself in manual labour, if he does not acquire the habit of diligent work, he will hardly be able to resist relapsing into drugs when he is back in the world.

A few more words about work. Experience has shown that those with an experience of drugs tend to be careless in using working tools and often wreck them. They would break down not only complex machinery, but also spades, woodchoppers, chisels – all that is put in their hands. What they do with their hands has to be often redone. This inability cannot be done away with immediately. They have to be urged again and again to be careful with common tools, equipment and their tasks. This should be explained to them long before they come to a parish.

10. In order to abandon a sinful life, especially drugs, one has to rethink many things. A sinner hopes naively to make himself happy by constraining his neighbour, by living at his neighbour's expense. This false attitude to life can be effectively changed if a sinner learns to exercise the spiritual law of assuming the sins of his neighbour through hatred or love for him. A detailed explanation of this law can be found in St. Mark the Ascetic. The explanation concerning hatred is this: if we have hurt our neighbour by stealing from him, slandering him, beating him, living at his expense through violence or ruse, etc., his sins are diverted from him to us to the measure of the hurt we have inflicted, and we instead of him will have to take punishment for them. So the scriptural words that he who loves injustice hates his own soul should be understood precisely in this sense.

11. I have already mentioned the fact that any parish is loath to smoking, and some do not accept smokers at all. When smoking is to be given up? – Before coming to a parish. The painful period coming after one's giving up smoking has to be gone through when one is still far

from the church. If the time is lost, a rehabilitant should not be advised to smoke his last cigarette before his departure for the parish. It is undesirable that his first days at a parish be distressing, for he can develop a settled dislike for his new home and its inhabitants. He can try giving up smoking after two or three weeks at a parish with the prayerful and moral support of the community.

12. In shared life at a parish there are always possibilities for differences, various confusions and occasions for arguments. What behavior does discretion prompt in these situations? Even if you believe you are a hundred times more right than your brother, it is still better to yield to him, if it is not a matter of sin, to avoid distressing him.

Thus, we have arrived at twelve points. Actually there are more points and each of the above ones can be expounded. Let it be done by those who prepare drug-addicts for life at a parish. It is difficult for those who have been corrupted by sin to grasp all this quickly and fully. The more so if a former drug-addict has not been prepared for church life. Coming to a parish, he cannot find his bearings immediately and is prone to make false steps. If there are companions in distress who have only begun their in-churching, he is likely to stick to them, instead of avoiding them discreetly. He will seek their advice, share his feelings with them, tell them about his broken life and share spare time with them. But he should not do it. At a parish one should draw closer to those who have learnt to walk in life avoiding sin. Concerning one's painful recollections about the period of addiction, one should try to get rid of them as soon as possible, even in private. When at a parish, a person gets a chance to inform his life with new things.

It should be said in conclusion that I do not create the illusion for myself that a person who is eager to stay at a parish will understand everything properly and right away if I have a thorough talk with him about the above. But let him accept it in his mind as a preliminary vaccination. Then he will find it somewhat easier to enter into the life of a parish.

Finally, it is necessary to bring it home to those who come to a parish from a rehabilitation center that a newcomer is not regarded there as a drug-addict but somebody who will make a new good brother. One's sinful past, as long as one lives it behind, will not be mentioned. It is beneficial to view only oneself as sinner and see in one's neighbour the image of God rather than sins. He who lived among parish dwellers righteously will inter into their life for good, will stay in their prayers and will always be a welcome guest. And if he is capable of persevering he may stay on.

A man is given the power to choose to be either a child of God or to turn back and prefer his sin to the eternal life with God. God is not vindictive and ready to forget every bad thing. There is always an opportunity to make a beginning. "When I say unto the wicked, Thou shalt surely die; if he turn from his sin, and do that which is lawful and right; if the wicked... walk in statutes of life, without committing iniquity; he shall surely live, he shall not die. None of his sins that he hath committed shall be mentioned unto him: he hath done that which is lawful and right; he shall surely live" (Ez. 33:14-16).