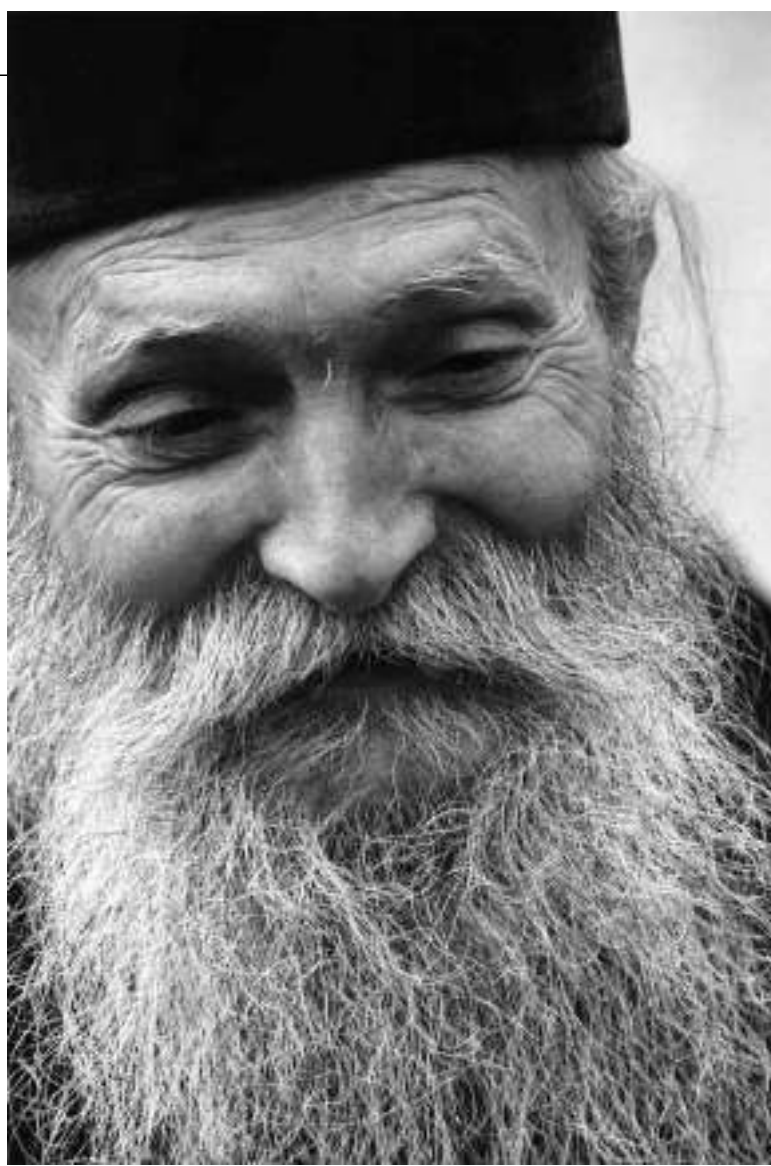


A portrait of an elderly man with a long, flowing white beard and a black cap, wearing a dark blue or black coat. He is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The background is a window with dark wooden frames.

OUR THOUGHTS
DETERMINE OUR LIVES

THE LIFE AND TEACHINGS OF
ELDER THADDEUS OF VITOVNICA

**OUR THOUGHTS
DETERMINE OUR LIVES**



Elder Thaddeus of Vitovnica. Photograph by Goran Veljkovic.

OUR THOUGHTS DETERMINE OUR LIVES

THE LIFE AND TEACHINGS OF
ELDER THADDEUS OF VITOVNICA

Compiled by the St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood

Translated by Ana Smiljanic



SAINT HERMAN OF ALASKA BROTHERHOOD

2011

Copyright © 2009, 2011 by the
St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood
P. O. Box 70
Platina, CA 96076

e-book Copyright © 2011 by the
St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood.

website: www.sainthermanpress.com

email: stherman@stherman.com

First edition: 2009

Second printing: 2010

Front and back covers: Elder Thaddeus. Photographs by Goran Veljkovic.

Publishers Cataloging in Publication

Our thoughts determine our lives : the life and teachings of Elder Thaddeus of Vitovnica
compiled by the St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood; translated by Ana Smiljanic.—1st ed.—
Platina, CA : St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, c2009.

p. ; cm.

isbn: 978-1-887904-19-3

Includes bibliographical references.

1. Shtrbulovich, Tadej, 1914–2003. 2. Clergy—Serbia—Biography. 3. Spiritual life.
Christian life—Orthodox Eastern Church. I. Smiljanic, Ana. II. St. Herman of Alaska
Brotherhood. III. Title.

BX395.S58 O87 2009 2009935762 2009935762
281.9/092—dc22 0910

CONTENTS

[Foreword](#)

[PART ONE](#)

[The Life of Elder Thaddeus](#)

[PART TWO](#)

[The Teachings of Elder Thaddeus](#)

[1. ON THOUGHTS](#)

[2. ON FAMILY LIFE](#)

[3. ON HUMILITY](#)

[4. ON SERVING GOD AND NEIGHBOR](#)

[5. ON MONASTICISM](#)

[6. ON REPENTANCE](#)

[7. ON PRAYER](#)

[8. ON LOVE](#)

[9. ON THE FALLEN WORLD](#)

[10. ON SPIRITUAL STRUGGLE](#)

[11. ON THE FAITH](#)

[12. ON INNER PEACE](#)

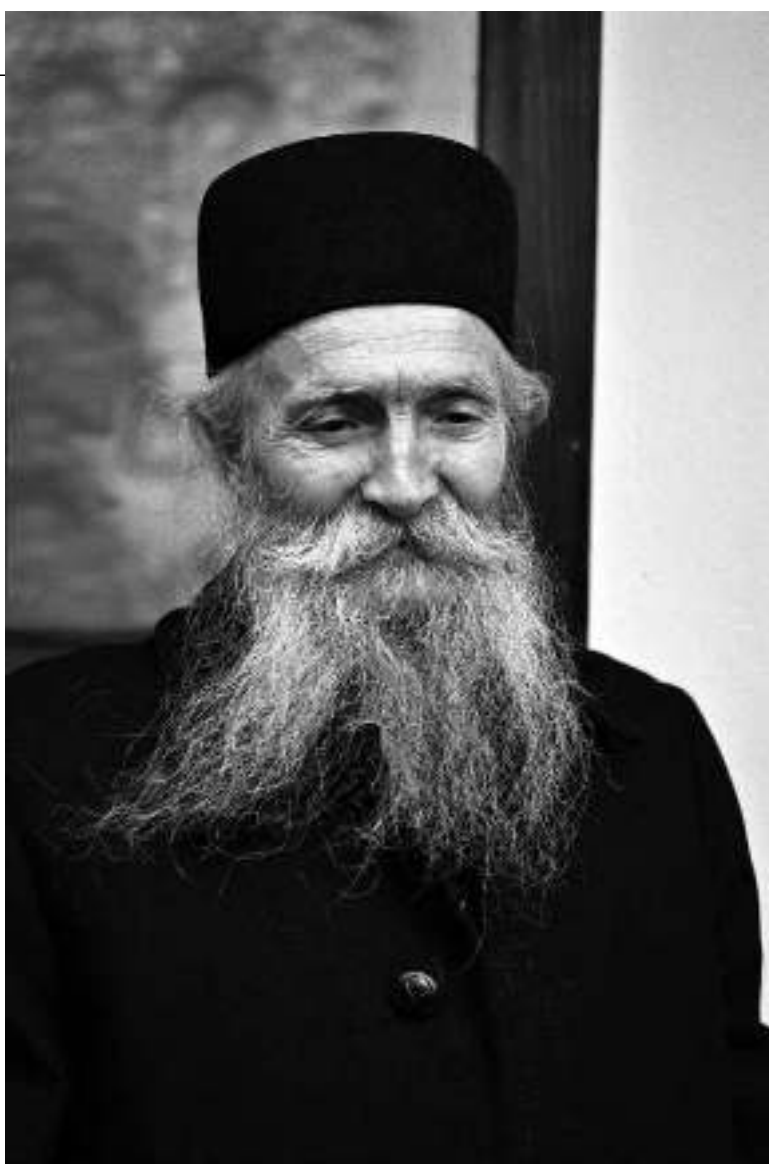
[13. ON THE SPIRITUAL REALM](#)

[14. A HOMILY ON THE DORMITION OF THE MOTHER OF GOD](#)

[15. REPENTANCE IS A CHANGE OF LIFE](#)

[16. COLLECTED SAYINGS OF ELDER THADDEUS](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)



Elder Thaddeus of Vitovnica. Photograph by Goran Veljkovic.

FOREWORD

Make peace with yourself, and both heaven and earth will make peace with you.
—St. Isaac the Syrian

Elder Thaddeus of Vitovnica was one of the foremost elders of twentieth-century Serbia. His counsel comforted thousands of people, especially during the dark days of Communism in Serbia, when every attempt was made to mock and undermine the Christian Faith. His words of peace, humility, and love were disseminated in the form of typewritten photocopies, cassette recordings, and through the testimony of his many spiritual children.

For much of his life, Archimandrite Thaddeus (Shtrbulovich) lived in obscurity, laboring for his own salvation and praying for the world. Not until the 1970s, when Fr. Thaddeus was over sixty years old, did people begin to flock to him, seeking counsel, healing, and consolation.

Born at the start of the First World War, Elder Thaddeus saw both the establishment of Yugoslavia in 1918 and its tragic collapse at the end of the twentieth century. In between these two monumental events, Fr. Thaddeus endured the privations of war, Nazi imprisonment, and persecution by Tito's Communist government. Despite all of these hardships, Fr. Thaddeus never lost faith in God, always striving to achieve communion with Him through the Sacraments of the Church and the prayer of the heart.

From his childhood, Fr. Thaddeus was occupied with the meaning of this life and the importance of thoughts. His struggle to understand the purpose of existence led him to see that our lives must be dedicated to serving others, and first of all, God. At the same time, he clearly saw—like his contemporary Elder Paisios of Mount Athos—that our thoughts can create heaven or hell around us in this world. He would return again and again to these themes throughout his life.

Through the influence of the traditions of the Optina and Valaam Monasteries, Fr. Thaddeus learned the art of prayer. At the Miljkovo Monastery in Serbia, where he became a novice in 1932, he became the spiritual son of Schema-archimandrite Ambrose, who was himself a disciple of the Optina Elders. It was through him that Fr. Thaddeus received the gift of Grace-filled prayer—the memory of which would light his way during the darkest years of the twentieth century. At Miljkovo, he was likewise a witness to the deep spiritual tradition of the Russian monks from Valaam, who had been uprooted from their beloved monastery.

Elder Thaddeus, despite his Grace-filled beginnings in the spiritual life, spent many years fighting against the very ailments that afflict so many people in our own era: stress, depression, and nervousness. Because of his own experience in warring against these life-destroying diseases, he was able to console and comfort the thousands of visitors who came to him later in his life. His counsel was always tailored for whoever was in front of him, but at the same time he never strayed far from his central instruction: “Our life depends on the kind of thoughts we nurture. If our thoughts are peaceful, calm, meek, and kind, then that is what our life is like. If our attention is turned to the circumstances in which we live, we are drawn into a whirlpool of thoughts and can have neither peace nor tranquility.”

Although few people in the West have heard of Elder Thaddeus, his words and life provide essential insights for our times. He understood the extent to which the philosophy of the modern age has wreaked devastation on the soul of man: through war, environmental destruction and, mo

importantly, man's turning away from God. Elder Thaddeus saw that the only cure for man's illness was a return to a life centered on Christ the God-man, the only One Who can fulfill all of mankind's needs.

May this book bring relief to all those burdened by the sorrows and uncertainties of our times, that they may turn their gaze to the One Who Is, our eternal Savior and Lord Jesus Christ.

Ryassaphore-monk Adri

July 18/31, 200

EDITORS' NOTES:

All footnotes have been supplied by the editors.

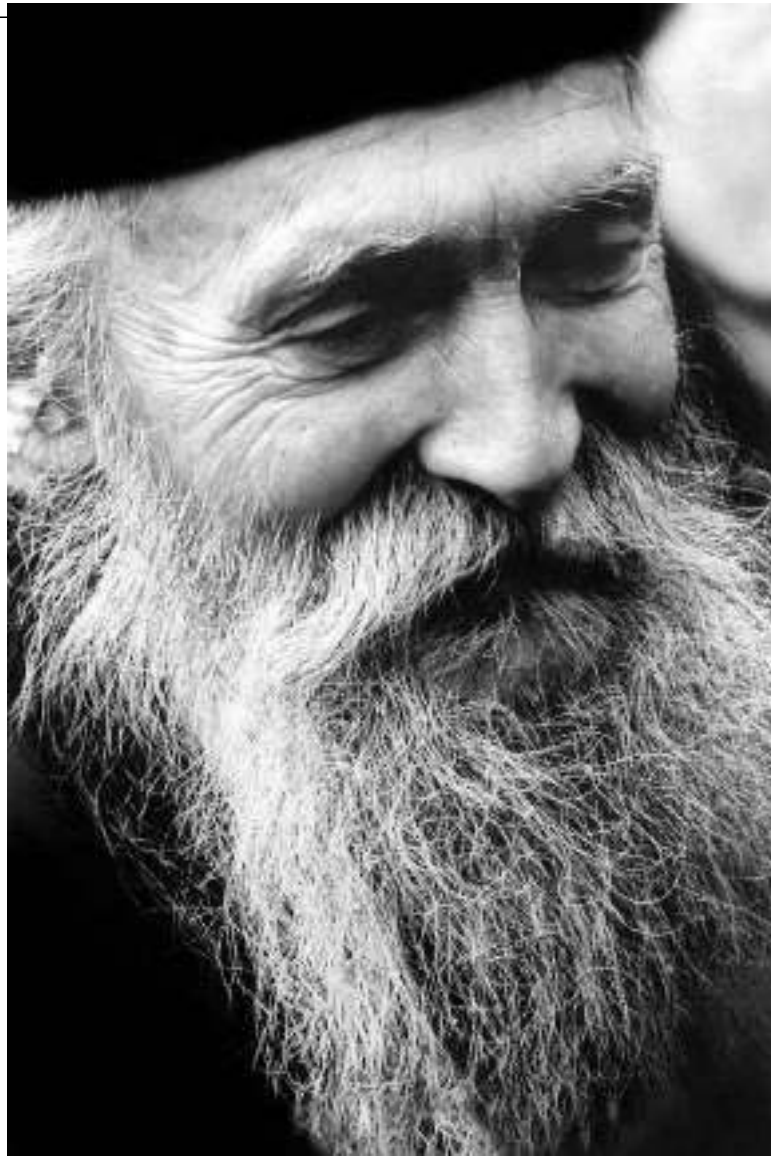
This book has been compiled primarily from materials originally published in the Serbian book Peace and Joy in the Holy Spirit. For more information, see Acknowledgments at the end of the book.



Map of Serbia, showing monasteries and some of the places mentioned in the Life of Elder Thaddeus.

PART ONE

THE LIFE OF
ELDER THADDEUS



Elder Thaddeus. Photograph by Goran Veljkovic.

THE LIFE OF ELDER THADDEUS

Childhood and Youth

Elder Thaddeus (Shtrbulovich) was born on October 6/19, 1914, on the feast day of the Holy Apostle Thomas, in whose honor he was given the name Tomislav in Holy Baptism. Two months premature, he was born at a village fair into a family of farmers from the village of Vitovnica near the town of Petrovac on the Mlava River. He was baptized immediately after birth, for his parents feared that the prematurely born infant would not live, as he barely showed any signs of life. He only opened his eyes after Baptism. As a child he was weak and sickly. When he became a monk later in life, he sometimes joked humbly at his own expense, saying, “Well, nothing good could have come out of me anyway, since I was born at a village fair!”

Tomislav had little joy during his childhood while growing up in a poor family during the First World War and the postwar years. His mother died when he was still a young child. Instead of quiet and tender maternal words, the sharp voice of one, then another, stepmother dominated his home. To escape the harshness of everyday life—in which the frail boy with an extremely sensitive soul saw so much sorrow—Tomislav resorted to living in his own world of thoughts and reflections. As he later recounted, on more than one occasion he fled from home with only a crust of bread in his pocket. He bore no resemblance to the other children in either stature, constitution, or character. This was his cross: he was different, even in respect to eating. As far back as he could remember, he could not eat anything prepared with lard, and he neither ate eggs nor drank milk. He could not bring himself even to taste meat. For this he was often scolded and forced to eat, but his system would not accept any food of animal origin. Until his sixteenth year he lived mostly on bread, onions, and cucumbers. He was born into this world as into a foreign land—to fast and to live in chastity from his earliest childhood. He grew up a child-ascetic and departed this life for the Kingdom of Heaven as an elder-ascetic.

Frequently chastised and ridiculed, regarded as incapable of work and generally useless in life, Tomislav could look for no solace in this world. “You’re not good for anything. Look at Mladen [a neighbor of the same age as Tomislav]. Now that’s a lad—helps his father and all! You just sit there and eat your bread for free!” These words hurt little Tomislav so much that he would run to the fields to sit under a tree. There, in the dewy grass, all alone in the world, he would pray for consolation and beseech the Lord to let him be of use too. He was constantly oppressed by the fear that his elders would not be satisfied with him. (This fear also tormented him during the first years of his life as a monk.)

There is no doubt that the soul of the little boy was also burdened by sadness because his father, a quiet and kind man, failed to protect him and to treat him as he, a child hungry for his father’s love, had hoped. “I was disappointed because my father remarried after my mother’s death and had two children with his new wife. I was even more disappointed when he married for the third time, because his second wife also died. Poor soul, the only reason he remarried was to have a woman about the house to take care of his children. Because of this war that I waged in my thoughts against my father, I was not able to grow spiritually for a very long time.”

God began to reveal to Tomislav at a very early age the mystery of thought and the noetic life: the

concentration of thought and the struggle against distractions of the mind. “Even as a child I pondered much upon everything. As a young boy I paid special attention to my thoughts. Now that I am old, I can see that I have yet to reach the degree of understanding of thoughts that I had as a child, for the Lord enlightens children. I was very young and had not yet started school when I noticed that my thoughts wandered while playing with other children. ‘This is not good,’ I told myself, ‘I must be present here in my thoughts, concentrating only on the task I am performing.’ But it was to no avail—my thoughts kept wandering.”

During those years the boy conceived in his heart a heavenly feeling of not belonging to this world, as well as a mystical desire to free himself from a world of sorrow and sadness, to dedicate himself entirely to God, and to seek comfort only in the quiet Lord, Who is the sole Comforter of all who suffer. The Living God softly spoke to the soul that had nowhere to lay its head (cf. Matt. 8:20): “When I understood that neither parents, nor family, nor friends, nor anyone in the world could offer me anything but pain, insults, and wounds, I resolved to stop living for the world and to dedicate my few remaining days in this life to the Lord. I understood that I had no one in the world except God. Simultaneously, God enlightened the boy’s mind to the knowledge that our earthly life consists of nothing but serving others, and that, in fact, there is no life other than that of serving and patiently bearing sorrow and pain. “I realized at a very early age that serving is what life is all about. Parents serve their children, and children serve their parents. It was then that a thought came to me: since everyone is here to serve someone else, I want to serve God, because He is above everyone else. See, that’s how God calls one from one’s earliest days.”

Although his childhood and early youth were, through Divine providence, painted in the colors of late autumn rather than spring, Elder Thaddeus always spoke with boundless love about his mother, from whom, as he said, he had inherited a sensitivity of soul, and about his father, who was a “quiet and meek man, unbelievably good-natured.” Until his last days, Elder Thaddeus said that he suffered a great deal because he had insulted his father in his thoughts, and that he could never repent enough over this. He always instructed his spiritual children on the importance of being obedient, both physically and mentally, to one’s thoughts, to one’s biological parents, for it is they who are, after the Lord, “our greatest good here on this earth.” He always taught them that the goal of Christian life was to return to the embrace of our Heavenly Father, the return of the Prodigal Son from the far country to the Land of the Living. “Throughout my whole life I was tormented by thoughts of the goal of our life—I often asked myself where we were going. Was life only about struggling to achieve material wealth, eating and drinking? Was that the meaning of life? Thank God, when we read the life of St. Seraphim of Sarov, the saint himself explains to us that the goal of our life is to return to the bosom of our Heavenly Father, in order that we, the men of this earth, may become as the angels, who are guided by the Holy Spirit.”

After he finished primary school with excellent marks, his parents sent him to Petrovac to learn the tailor’s trade—seeing that because of his poor health and physical weakness he was not fit to work the land. He completed his studies in trade and commerce in Petrovac, but he was unsuccessful in the new job, and suffered much at the hands of cruel and unfeeling people.

The Monastic Call

In 1932, eighteen-year-old Tomislav was completely occupied with thoughts concerning the meaning of life. Out of the depths of his heart arose the desire to become a monk. He wrote a letter to the brotherhood of Gornjak Monastery, begging them to accept him as a novice. God’s providence willed that he should wait six months for an answer. What happened in the meantime greatly influenced his future. While waiting for an answer from the monastery, Tomislav fell gravely ill with pulmonary disease and had to be taken to Belgrade for treatment. He spent forty-seven days in the hospital

Because of his poor health and slight build, his condition did not improve.



Gornjak Monastery church. Photograph by Vladimir Markovic.



Gornjak Monastery gates. Photograph by Vladimir Markovic.

“A medical council was formed to decide on my further treatment. After debating for some time they prescribed a very complicated and painful therapy for me: pneumothorax, a difficult and torturous procedure of injecting oxygen combined with medications into my lungs. I had heard from other patients that this therapy was very painful and exhausting and that even physically strong patients struggled through it, and so I said to my doctor, ‘If you have any other kind of medication for me—fine. If not, I am not willing to undergo this therapy.’ The doctors became very angry. ‘Who are you to teach us how to cure people!’ they said. ‘You are to come tomorrow to the tuberculosis department to start with your therapy!’

“‘Well,’ I thought, ‘it’s highly unlikely that you will see me there tomorrow.’ I asked them how long I would live without this therapy of theirs. One woman doctor told me, ‘If you agree to take the therapy you may be cured of your illness, but if not, you certainly will not live longer than five years.’ And I thought, ‘So they are not even sure of the outcome of the therapy!’ I accepted my condition and decided to spend the remaining five years of my life serving God. However, a new problem arose: my parents did not agree with my decision.

“But my commitment would not allow me to be at peace [with my parents’ objections], and so I went to the Gornjak Monastery against my parents’ will. I arrived there in the late evening hours, just as the abbot [Fr. Seraphim] was coming out of the church after Vespers. He received me kindly. I told him about my decision to dedicate my life to the service of God and explained to him my understanding of the monastic life. A Russian monk sat with us. I cannot remember exactly what he said to the abbot. Before Liturgy the following day, I caught a glimpse of the Russian monk taking the *prosphora*,¹ wine, and water to church. He went into the church and I followed him. He took the *prosphora*, wine, and water into the altar, and I venerated the icons. When he came out of the altar, he said to me, ‘I heard what you were talking about with the abbot. I heard your thoughts on monasticism. You are not going to find the kind of monasticism you are looking for anywhere in Serbia except among the Russian monks of the Miljkovo Monastery. The brotherhood of the

monastery is made up of monks exiled from Valaam Monastery in Finland.'

~~“This is where you should go,' the monk told me. 'It is only there that you can find what your soul desires.' I was uncertain as to whether they would accept me and said so. 'They will,' answered the monk.”~~

This took place on July 24/August 6, 1932.

Miljkovo Monastery: In the Paradise of First Grace

Miljkovo Monastery was at that time home to Russian monastics, many of whom had come to Serbia from the well-known monastery of Valaam, persecuted by their own kin. In 1918 the Valaam Island, the “Mount Athos of the North,” were annexed from Russia and became a part of Finland. Valaam Monastery thus fell under the jurisdiction of the Finnish Orthodox Church, which would accept the New Calendar in 1921. After a great struggle, in 1925 the Finnish Church authorities forced Valaam Monastery to accept the New Calendar. Most of the monks faithful to the Church Calendar of the Russian Orthodox Church were banished from the monastery between 1925 and 1927. By Divine providence many of them came to Serbia, were accepted by the Church, and given a place in Serbian monasteries. A number of the monks came to Miljkovo Monastery.



The Miljkovo Monastery brotherhood during Fr. Ambrose's abbacy. At center is Metropolitan Anthony (Khrapovitsky); next to him (on left) is Schema-archimandrite Ambrose. Photograph from Archpriest Peter Perekrestov Archive.

Their spiritual father was Schema-archimandrite Ambrose (Kurganov) (†1933),² a spiritual child of the Optina Elders.³ These monks brought with them the hesychastic spirit of coenobitic monasticism that Valaam had shared in common with Optina. The Miljkovo Monastery adhered to the strict Valaam typicon⁴ and the services were typically “Russian,” often lasting for many hours. The monks obeyed a rigorous fasting rule, and the cell prayer rules were long and tiring. The Holy Liturgy was served daily. Throughout his entire life as a hieromonk,⁵ Fr. Thaddeus strove to fulfill the Valaam prayer rule and to serve the Holy Liturgy every day, even when he was very ill. He often repeated the words of St. John of Kronstadt: “When I am not serving the Holy Liturgy, I feel as though I am dying!”

Many years later Fr. Thaddeus would recount his arrival at the monastery: “At the gate of the Miljkovo Monastery, I saw a young novice and asked him if the abbot was there. He was. The young novice agreed to take me to him. The abbot had rolled up his robe and was treading mud mixed with chaff with his bare feet. He looked at me and said, ‘So, you want to be a monk, do you?’ I said I did. ‘Good,’ he said. ‘I’m building a *banya*⁶ for the brethren.’

“He instructed the novice to take me to the refectory and to give me some food. ‘Give him a cell, too, so that he can rest. There will be a vigil tonight. This young man is not used to our long vigils. The vigil was indeed very long. It began at six and ended at eleven o’clock. They served the Holy Liturgy and the full cycle of prayers every day. After a week had gone by, the abbot called me to him and asked me, ‘Do you like it here? Would you like to stay?’ I answered that I very much wanted to stay. ‘Good,’ said the abbot. ‘I have already talked to Fr. Paul.’ Fr. Paul was from Bosnia, an elder monk about seventy years old. He had lived in America for many years, and when he returned to Serbia he originally became a monk at the Gornjak Monastery. ‘Fr. Paul takes care of the vineyard. Near the vineyard there is a small house. That is where he sleeps. You will take care of the vineyard.’

now, and Fr. Paul will come down to the monastery to help the brethren. He is an experienced monk
And so I stayed at the Miljkovo Monastery.”



Schema-archimandrite Ambrose. Photograph from Archpriest Peter Perekrestov Archive.

There were about thirty monks in the monastery. Schema-archimandrite Ambrose was the living sun of the Miljkovo Monastery and an ascetic who lived a holy life. As a novice he had been under the guidance of Elder Theodosius, the superior of the Optina Skete.⁷ Fr. Ambrose had the gift of unceasing prayer and lived in constant remembrance of death. He emanated the joy and peacefulness of the Kingdom of God. Fr. Thaddeus, who until the end of his earthly life nurtured a burning love for his spiritual teacher, said of him, “Fr. Ambrose radiated an unbelievable and pure love. He had received the best gift of all from the Optina Elders—love. He never became angry with any of his monks or novices and never uttered a sharp word to them. He bore everything with patience and forgave everyone. He placed all of his cares and burdens at the feet of the Lord and confided all his sorrows only to Him. He strove to pass all of this on to the brotherhood of his monastery, and many of them learned how to nurture and apply this all-encompassing and passionless love in their everyday lives.”

It was with this spirit of Divine love that Elder Ambrose, himself an example of righteous living, kindled a spark in the pure soul of Br. Tomislav, for whom this Divine love would always remain as the only measure of true life. Fr. Ambrose “would always be the first to arrive in church for the services and stand beside the abbot’s chair. One could see that he was heavily burdened with cares for the monastery, but he never complained to anyone, confiding only in God. He never punished anyone or held a bad thought about anyone, let alone looked at anyone with anger. He loved everyone just as

they were and prayed to God to enlighten them. He taught others mostly by his own example, through which he strove to lead everyone onto the path of salvation.”

The first days at the monastery were ones of the greatest joy for Br. Tomislav. Immersing himself in the mystical relationship between spiritual father and son, he learned from Fr. Ambrose about holiness and salvific obedience, vigilance over his thoughts, and the Jesus Prayer.⁸ “Fr. Ambrose said to me, ‘Whatever you do, always silently repeat these words: Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner!’ I was a young lad and I obeyed him with all my heart. Each night I would confess before my spiritual father and tell him what was happening within my soul, and he would counsel me.” The novice, believing that he had only five years left to live, gave himself completely over to the prayer of the heart. “In a very short while, because of my complete surrender to the will of God and sincere longing for Him, I was enlightened by the Grace of God, which created an indescribable feeling of joy and peace. I listened to my heart and inside it I heard the words ‘Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’ I tried to remember certain events from the past and I could not. All my thoughts were at peace and a feeling of ineffable joy and longing reigned in my entire being. Such is the state of the angels and the saints, a state of complete and perfect Grace. Only those who have experienced the gift of Grace understand the state of the angels and the saints, who are led by the Holy Spirit.” Thus Tomislav became the humble receptacle of the hesychastic spirit of the Church adorned by the fragrant blossom of the prayer of the heart.

Later, Fr. Thaddeus would repeatedly tell his spiritual children about “gratuitous Grace” as a priceless gift from God, through which God guides us in our spiritual life, in the beginning showing us the goal of our life—deification in Christ within the Church—and in times of sorrow and suffering giving us strength and comfort. Being inexperienced in the spiritual life, Br. Tomislav thought that all monks possess this God-bestowed gratuitous Grace, and it was only much later that he understood that God’s love had made him worthy of a great and undeserved gift, preparing him for the Golgotha of his future service as an abbot and a spiritual father to many. “I thought that all monastics, priests and bishops had the gift of gratuitous Grace and—would you believe it?—I have spent so many years now among monks and priests, and I have met only one monk who had this gift. Only one! However, among lay people who live with their families, I have encountered many individuals who have received this gift of Grace.”

- [**OATrageous Oatmeals: Delicious & Surprising Plant-Based Dishes From This Humble, Heart Healthy Grain for free**](#)
- [*click Beer: Tap into the Art and Science of Brewing \(3rd Edition\)*](#)
- [download The Mystery of the Traveling Tomato \(The Boxcar Children, Book 117\) online](#)
- [**Castle in the Air \(Howl's Castle Series, Book 2\) online**](#)
- [Nerve Center: Inside the White House Situation Room here](#)
- [download An Introduction to Stata Programming](#)

- <http://drmurphreesnewsletters.com/library/OATrageous-Oatmeals--Delicious---Surprising-Plant-Based-Dishes-From-This-Humble--Heart-Healthy-Grain.pdf>
- <http://metromekanik.com/ebooks/The-Basque-History-of-the-World.pdf>
- <http://interactmg.com/ebooks/The-Mystery-of-the-Traveling-Tomato--The-Boxcar-Children--Book-117-.pdf>
- <http://creativebeard.ru/freebooks/Cyber-Physical-Attacks--A-Growing-Invisible-Threat.pdf>
- <http://qolorea.com/library/Nerve-Center--Inside-the-White-House-Situation-Room.pdf>
- <http://interactmg.com/ebooks/House-Corrino--Dune--House-Trilogy--Book-3-.pdf>